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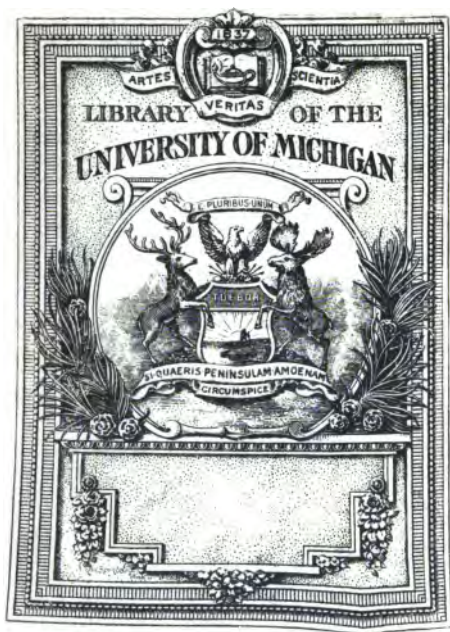
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The Historical Tragedy of Nero

BY THE SAME AUTHOR.

POEMS

BY

K. H. D.

**SIMPKIN, MARSHALL, HAMILTON,
KENT & CO., LTD., PUBLISHERS,**

THE HISTORICAL TRAGEDY OF NERO

BY
K. H. D. CECIL

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1904

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Dedication to Angelica

AUTUMN is near at hand, when I sing anew,
 And gone the glory that was earth's before.
 The grass is wet with summer's parting dew,
 A tear o'er itself that it is no more.
 No more it smiles around us on the earth !
 No more the mortal bosoms leap with joy !
 No more the children's laughter and the mirth !
 No more the piping of the shepherd-boy !

And yet to me it means no change of time ;
 I do not feel the autumn that is come.
 I only feel that I am made sublime
 By Love, that suddenly hath found its home
 Within my heart. So autumn cannot blast
 The summer which is yet both thine and mine,
 Though beauty from the world hath ere-long past,
 And mortal losers for their losses pine.

I look, and all around me I behold
 No sights but those of glory and of love,
 No face but full of blisses manifold,
 For I am happy as the stars above.

6 Dedication to Angelica

At heart I feel the touch of golden spring,
A spring which blooms in all its virgin pride,
A spring which was as yet an unknown thing,
For thou, my Angely, art by my side.

Ah! thou art by my side, my Angely!
Thou art where I would have thee till my life.
I clasp thee fast, and whisper unto thee,
Which none but God doth hear, "My little wife!"
I whisper so; thy loving bosom stirs
With thoughts that are too stormy to suppress,
Until I read the message that infers,
A passion, dazzled by its own excess.

Remain for ever where thou standest now,
A near my heart, nay nearest to my soul!
For ever thou art I, and I am thou,
Two hearts, two souls that now become one whole.
The vow too sweet, and too divine to break,
Which God and angels heard within the wood,
No power on the earth shall soil, or shake,
If to the vow we both were true and good.

Thou lily! purer than the lilies pure,
White angels lifting up their souls to God,
Let no temptation of the earth allure
Thee from the path which thou till now hast trod.

Dedication to Angelica 7

I found thee pure, and found a sweet relief,
When first I gazed on thee, with love's intent,
Anon I came back to my old belief
That once again the world was innocent.

And once again in all its innocence,
The world, this human world, doth smile for me,
As if redeemed and saved by penitence.
Beside thee hand in hand I walk with thee,
And sing to thee, as ne'er I sang before.
For thee I sing, and only for thy sake,
For thee who art my all, nor canst be more,
The inspiration of the song I make.

Therefore, to thee, beloved of my heart,
Thou dream I never hoped to realise !
More dear than words can say how dear thou art,
Words which the living mortals may despise,
To thee my "Nero" do I dedicate,
For thou whate'er is mine shall e'er esteem,
Which may the world perchance, or soon or late,
Hurl deep and downwards in Oblivion's stream.

For long have I been ploughing in the field
Of Poesy, so bitter and so sweet ;
And now the fruit, which did my labours yield,
However poor, I lay before thy feet.

8 Dedication to Angelica

Walk forth with it, if thou dost not despise,
Beloved ! aught that I tender unto thee,
And beg the world to see it with thine eyes,
And keep it, if it would, as tenderly.

Nay, nay, come back ! The world for aught we
know

May never care such kindness to impart,
Nor on the gift its eulogies bestow,
But wound instead thy sweet and tender heart.
The world may prove unkind, for I have heard
That kindness seldom is with kindness paid,
Thou yet have I not by myself averred
That thus should I be of the world afraid.

Kind or unkind, I cannot love it less,
Born with the deathless love of humankind.
But till it think it worthy to impress
Thy offer with its stamp, since Love is blind,
Keep thou the gift, and give me back love's bliss
By whispering " This is most dear to me ! "
Take it, and lay upon the charm a kiss,
For thy kiss is my immortality.

21st August 1904.

Dramatis Personæ

ERRATA

Page Line

- 8, 11, *for* Thou *read* Though.
13, 22, *for* doze *read* dose.
27, 2, *for* pleadings *read* peelings.
40, 1, *for* dreamt *read* dream.
45, 11, *for* lust *read* dust.
48, 13, *for* seers *read* seas.
71, 2, *for* objection *read* subjection.
114, 4, *for* freeman *read* freedman.
132, 6, *for* Or *read* O !
140, 10, *for* ash *read* ashes.
146, 11, *for* O dear, my lord ! *read* O dear my lord !
154, 5, *for* thereafter *read* Hereafter.
158, 15, *for* betwixt and *read* betwixt.

CLAUDIUS, *Roman Emperor.*
BRITANNICUS, *son to Claudius by his third wife.*
NERO, *son to Agrippina by her first husband, adopted by Claudius,
and afterwards Emperor.*
OTHO, *a noble of the court.*
BURREHUS, *prefect of the pretorian guards.*
SENECA, *a philosopher, once tutor to Nero.*
LUCAN, *a poet and brother to Seneca.*
LIGARIUS, *a tribune.*
VELUTUS, *a tribune.*
PISO, *chief of the conspirators against Nero.*
MILICHUS, *a conspirator.*
ANTONIUS NATALIS, *a conspirator.*
ANICETUS, *a commander of a fleet.*
HERCULEUS, *a captain of a trireme.*
OLOARITUS, *a centurion in a fleet.*
PHAON, *a freedman of Nero.*
AGERINUS, *a freedman of Agrippina.*
EPAPHRODITUS, *a slave to Nero.*
VANTELIIUS, *a sculptor.*
VOLUMNIUS, *a musician.*
A Prefect of the Guards.

AGRIPPINA, *fourth wife to Claudius.*
OCTAVIA, *daughter to Claudius by his third wife, and wife to
Nero.*
POPPÆA SABINA, *wife to Otho, afterwards to Nero.*
PULLINA, *wife to Seneca.*
ANTONIA, *daughter to Claudius by his third wife.*
STATILIA, *third wife to Nero.*

Senators, nobles, conspirators, guards, soldiers,
citizens, ghosts, attendants, etc.

The Historical Tragedy of Nero

ACT I.

SCENE I. — *Rome. A Room in the Palace.*
Emperor Claudius lying ill on a couch, and
Agrippina discovered with a cup in her hand.

Agri. What, hast thou fallen so much in love
with death
That thou already sleep'st so fast? Sleep, sleep,
Thou worn-out figure of an emperor?
This sleep is a sure prologue to thy death,
I to thy shattered physique will prescribe,
Which soon will give thee the eternal sleep.
[*Pours poison in the bowl.*]

Enter Nero.

Nero. Mother!

Agri. Hush, hush! he sleeps.

Nero. For ever?

Agri. Not yet.

Get thee hence, and come back when I call thee.

[*Exit Nero.*]

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Clau. (*waking*). O Agrippina !

Agri. My lord !

Clau. Come, sit by me !

Give me thy hand, I am so full of fear,
Not for death which will at its season come,
But for a crueller fate that hangs o'er me,
That shook my body in a restless sleep.
O ! in the visitation of a dream
Methought I saw a shadow stealing by,
With a small bowl of poison in its hands,
Bearing to my lips, which I did quaff at once.
What may it mean ? Ah me ! I am afraid
They'll kill me.

Agri. Not while Agrippina lives.

Clau. I trust thee more than I do trust myself,
And I doubt not but thou wilt prove more true
Than Massalina who did, faithless, aim,
And for my crown conspire, against my life,
So that her guilty love might shine in it.
But I had her despatched before that time,
Who threw my golden name into the dust,
And on her own set an eternal blot.
Live thou so as to raise my name again.

Agri. Give not yourself unnecessary care,
But sleep in peace, and I will watch by you !
A little while ago here came your son,
Britannicus, "Madam, would you be relieved ?"
But I, mistrusting his grave countenance,
With proof of inward ugly thoughts imprest,

The Tragedy of Nero 13

With thanks refused the proffer that he made,
Saying I was not weary of my charge.
No intrigues will I let approach my lord.

Clau. Dear Agrippina, thanks for thy regard !
But young Britannicus conceives no harm,
Being as yet of an unprompting age.
Nevertheless, let none approach my couch !
I fear my death will work confusion here,
And Rome will be oppressed by civil strife,
For Nero and Britannicus, my son,
Each other hate, both rivals to my crown,
And sure will strike against each other's head,
Like two dogs, fighting for one piece of bone.
Methinks, when I am dead, they both will jump
As eagerly on what I leave behind,—
My name, my power, my sceptre, and my crown,
As soldiers seize upon the enemy's spoils.

Agri. My lord ! you do injustice to our son,
For Nero yet is thoughtless of the crown,
And his ambition doth not tend that way.

Clau. Well, thou shalt see—I am dropping
again,
Give me another doze !

[*She hands him the bowl. He drinks.*]

Agri. Take it and farewell ! (*aside*).

Now be at ease !

You must not talk till you feel strong again.
Now, pray lie down, and have a quiet sleep,
For sleep works swifter than best medicine.

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Clau. O! what is it? I am feeling short of
breath,

And like an eddy my mind is whirling round.

I am poisoned, O gods, I am poisoned!

Is there none here? They've killed the emperor!

Agri. (*going closer*). What means my lord?

Clau. (*pushing her away*). Away, away, thou
hyena!

Thou and thy damnèd son have murdered me.

My curses fall upon your cursèd heads! [*Dies.*

Enter Nero.

Nero. Well, mother?

Agri. Impatient! I did not call thee.

Nero. Tell me, doth he sleep?

Agri. Aye.

Nero. No more to wake?

Agri. Come near, and thou shalt find it out
thyself.

Nero. By Jupiter he will not wake again,
Unless his ghost would walk across our paths,
I cannot praise you too much for your skill.

The very devil could have done no better.

The crown! The crown! Where is the crown?

Ha, there! [*Puts it on.*

Tell me, do I look like an emperor?

Agri. Far more imperial than that earth-cold form.

Nero, when thou art openly acclaimed,

And when in new-come triumph dost thou wear

The Tragedy of Nero 15

The crown, forget not who did give it thee!

Nero. Good mother! I shall not be so ungrateful.

Now go and summon all my friends within,

Kind Burrhus, Seneca and Lucan too.

And wake the palace to the death of Claudius,

And pray you do it with some vehemence too.

Agri. Remember thou and I must rule conjoint.

[*Exit.*

Nero. No, no, that shalt not be, that shalt not be.

Now I've obtained the ladder I will mount,

And sit undaunted on the very top;

And who makes bold to drag me from my height

Shall sink for e'er forgotten in the dust.

Sweet crown! why art thou shaking as from fear?

Wilt thou come off ere thou art surely fixed?

Rest on my greedy head a little while.

I hear the people shouting through the streets,

'Long live Emperor Nero.' [Exit.

SCENE 2.—*An Apartment in the Palace.*

Enter Agrippina and Nero.

Nero. I met the children of dead Claudius pass
To the death-chamber. There let them stay and
mourn,

While we transact this piece of business here.

And, mother, have you sent for them?

Agri.

I have.

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Nero. With emphasis of an immediate summons?

Agri. Even so, and here they come to answer it.

Enter Seneca, Burrhus and Lucan.

Nero. Friends! I need not enlarge upon my grief,

As none but I am privy to my heart,

While there is time to speak of other things.

But soft, before I speak let me make sure

I speak to none but such as are my friends.

Bur. My lord! we thought you were already assured.

Nero. It is well then; now will I speak my mind.

Will you have Nero or Britannicus

Retain the title and the name of Claudius?

If you do love me, friends, then prove it now,

For now it is I try your worth and substance.

'Tis my ambition to possess the crown

And see the royal badge upon my head

Which fain had Claudius, were he living now,

Put there himself and ne'er regretted it.

Speak, then, will you uphold whom you befriend?

Bur. As for myself and the prætorian guards

It is a settled matter which shall not fail,

For I consider you the rightful heir.

Nero. Why are you silent, my good Seneca?

Sen. In sooth, my lord! I know not what to say.

The Tragedy of Nero 17

Nero. Do you not like to see your pupil crowned ?

Sen. Not so, but you disbar Britannicus.

Nero. Not so, but that you love me not enough.

Sen. I've never proved so guilty of that want.

I am more jealous of your name than power.

It is not either wealth or earthly power

So much as a good name that makes a man.

For wealth and power and even the great names

Of kings may all be easily forgot,

As these are things that in the end are nothings,

But a good name, my lord, may live for ages.

Nero. A pretty truth most prettily impressed.

But what about the question of the throne ?

Agri. Good Seneca, 'twas the last will of
Claudius,

Expressed full with a father's fervency,

That Nero should succeed him to the throne.

Therefore, in carrying out your emperor's will

You neither do supplant Britannicus,

Who hath a lasting taint upon his birth,

Nor kill your conscience by any unjust deed.

Sen. If so the emperor willed, then be it so.

Nero. In truth, dear Seneca, I love you much,

And that I love you I am proud withal.

What says good Lucan ? He will not dissent.

With youngers elders must assert their sway.

Luc. My lord ! to prove you I do not pretend

A hollow friendship, I too join my voice

With those who think you are the rightful heir.

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Nero. If I shall rule, be sure that in my reign
You shall enjoy the double offices
Of quæstor and augur ; and you, friend Burrhus,
Shall be as great as the prætorian guards
Were in the great days of the great Augustus,
And Seneca my guiding minister.
Burrhus ! you shall prevail upon the mob
By stirring up the tribunes to our cause,
And bring in all the provinces as well
To our adherence, and leave nothing blank.
Pray go, despatch it with a fervent zeal
As if yourself not I were to be crowned.

[*Exit Seneca, Burrhus and Lucan.*]

Agri. 'Tis Burrhus who will do the rest for you.

Nero. I like him ; he's a blunt and honest man.

Agri. Thou canst not fathom, boy, thy mother's
joy ?

The quantity cannot contain itself.

O how I love to see thee crowned and think

Thou never shalt forget who gave it thee !

But soft ! Octavia ! She must not see me here.

[*Exit Agrippina.*]

Enter Octavia.

Oct. My lord ! will you not soothe me in my grief ?

Nero. Thinkst thou, thou girl, I am not grieved
withal ?

But get thee gone, for I am busy now.

Oct. Busy, my lord ?

The Tragedy of Nero 19

Nero. Aye, busy, if thou wouldst know.

Oct. May not Octavia know your business then?

Nero. Avaunt! this is no time for idle amours!

Oct. Idle amours? Say you that to love your wife
And share with her your heart is idle amours?

Sure with another's wife it would be so,

But with your own—

Nero. Go, get thee hence at once.

Oct. Nay, hear me speak.

Nero. Away, thou idle tongue!
Or by all the gods I will break thy head.

[*Exit Octavia in fright.*

Enter Sabina.

Sab. Still hanging round your wife?

Nero. Come, come, my sweet!
When Venus shines who cares for lesser stars?
Thinkst thou that I, once having seen thy face,
Could doat upon another?—My sweet Poppæa!

[*Kisses her.*

Sab. Claudius is dead.

Nero. That is no news, my dove!

Sab. Tell me, could not that news have been
avoided?

Nero. Hush! hush!

Sab. 'Tis well! I love that soft confession!

Nero. 'Tis false; he died at peace with all the
world.

Sab. Poppæa hath more eyes than those you see.

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You need not fear, I like it as it is.

But, Nero, shall I ever be your mistress?

Nero. Until I take the guilt of bigamy.

Sab. Divorce Octavia.

Nero. On what ground, my sweet?

Sab. Of barrenness.

Nero. When I am emperor.

Sab. You will?

Nero. I will, I will.

Sab. Come, swear it then.

Nero. I swear.

Sab. Now I'm content; kiss me again.

[*He kisses her. Exit Sabina fondly looking at him.*]

Enter Britannicus.

Brit. I wish my father had lived longer yet.

It is a pity to be crowned so young.

Nero. Try not the unachievable to achieve,

As children try, not knowing what they do,

To catch the dancing sunbeams on the floor.

It is not seldom that an obscure son

Thrives on the credit of a glorious father,

Like a new school going on its old name.

But thou shalt thrive not by such chance, be sure.

Brit. Am I not to succeed my father then?

Nero. Boy! wait till the succession hath been fixed.

It is not for boys to be emperors.

Bri. Why, I have seen two summers less than you,

The Tragedy of Nero 21

And you have seen but ten and seven !

Nero.

But, boy !

In wisdom I am twenty years thine older.

Thou canst not rule a Roman empire, unless

'Twere to undo what our forefathers did.

Brit. Your pride and your conceit amaze me,
Nero !

You would not mock me so, while Claudius lived.

Boy or no boy, I am an emperor's son,

By right whereof now emperor myself.

Nero. Begone ! I will not stomach thy affront.

Brit. Hide you for shame yourself and get you
gone !

You have no conscience who by unfair means

In borrowed feathers basely long to shine.

Nero. Rude boy ! thou shalt rue this, while
Nero lives. *[Exit Nero.]*

Brit. Am I a boy ? And what of that, if so ?

I am a Roman and an emperor's son,

And heir to the imperial vacancy.

But he would rob me of my native prize,

In which what with his mother's foul intrigues

And his friends' voice, he'll triumph over me.

I pity me, for is it not a pity

To be left friendless in a vast wide world ?

But soft, Otho appears ; I'll speak to him.

Enter Otho.

Come, Otho, come, I am so heavy at heart ?

22 The Tragedy of Nero

Otho. Fain would I have your father live again.

Brit. My grief for him outweighs all other griefs
Of which the latest born is for a loss
Which ne'er shall be recover'd.

Otho. What do you mean ?

Brit. That Nero stands my rival in my claim.

Otho. An upstart and a creature of your father ;
In truth, Britannicus, your father erred
To bring to court a villain such as he,
I do hate him as much as I love you,
And fain would I stand upon your behalf,
Though thereby I incur his hate and spite,
If you would pledge to do me a good turn.

Brit. What is that, Otho ?

Otho. Your sister Antonia !
By Jupiter I love her.

Brit. But you are married.

Otho. To a woman who is another's wife.
Why, know you not that she is Nero's mistress ?
Let him have her, and give me sweet Antonia ?

Brit. Otho ! I hate you for your shamelessness !
You have your reputation marred, Otho !
By an ignoble life which they condemn
Who are truly noble.

Otho. Trash, trash, my dear boy !
You know not what charm lives in such a life.
The gods, too, love it as much as we do.
The man who lives content with her he weds
Is not a man, but to my mind, a fool,

The Tragedy of Nero 23

A coward, and not fit to be a soldier.

Brit. I pray you poison not my innocent soul !
Go, Otho, go ! you are no friend for me.

Otho. Come, come away ; I'll take you to the
people,
And to the Senate stand your advocate.

Brit. But, Otho, they will never count your voice,
Knowing how much you are condemned by all.

Otho. I tell you, boy, be more discreet in speech.
Will you withdraw your words ?

Brit. No, never, Otho !

It is a maxim which I hold for true
Whatever hath been uttered in hot haste,
Or in direct injustice to a man,
Must be withdrawn ;—'tis conquest not defeat ;
But if 'tis founded on determined proofs,
Then stick to it as leeches stick on arms.

Otho. I think that you will stand philosophizing
While Nero smiles with your crown on his head.
Come, come away, or you shall weep for ever.

[*Exit both.*]

SCENE 3.—*A Street.*

Enter Citizens.

1st Cit. In your thoughts which of the two is
fitter to rule us, Nero or Britannicus ?

2nd Cit. I am for Nero.

3rd Cit. But he hath more conceit than merit.

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2nd Cit. Nay, learning is not conceit. Who would learn conceit that hath a tutor like the worthy Seneca? And Nero, being trained and moulded by such a master, is in my mind more fit to rule us than Britannicus, who stands not on such a vantage ground.

4th Cit. But Britannicus is the rightful heir, while Nero only bears his name by adoption.

2nd Cit. Methinks that is the strongest point in his favour, and I doubt not that they will urge it to the Senate.

1st Cit. Claudius with all that was good and bad in the man was an imbecile weakling, more inclined to revelry than ruling, whereas Nero, as yet unspoilt, gives out a better promise.

2nd Cit. And he is the angel of the people. His birth, his learning and his beauteous favour have made him the centre of our admiration. Let us uphold him.

3rd Cit. Make way, here comes Britannicus with Otho.

Enter Britannicus and Otho.

Otho. Good citizens ! pray spare your ears awhile,
While in the name of justice and of truth,
Our young Britannicus, the rightful heir,
Speaks to you. (*Brit.*) Now, come, speak your
very best

Brit. Good citizens ! there had been little cause

The Tragedy of Nero 25

For me to stir abroad at such a time
When fittier I should have mourned alone,
But truth and justice bring me out to you.
You all do know that I am Claudius' son,
And by that right immediate to the throne,
While Nero only by adoption so,
Who threatens to supplant me in my claim
That he may shine into a place usurped.
If you are Romans still, honest and good,
As I believe you are and will be ever,
Despising all oppression and tyranny,
Ready to drive all upstarts from your land ;
If, citizens ! you have not yet forgot
That justice is the virtue of the gods,
To my cause lend me your unanimous voice,
That thereby you may right the grievous wrong
Which Nero with his friends seeks to do me.
Now answer me, will you stand up for me ?

2nd Cit. Shall we tell him that Nero is our man ?

1st Cit. No, not yet. Tell him we shall consider his rights.

2nd Cit. Sir, we shall consider your rights.

Otho. You seem to think upon his boyish age,
But, citizens ! that must not be a bar.
He'll make a choice among the ripest men
Who by experience are the fittest found
To rule and govern wisely our vast empire,
To know the blessings of mild regiment,
And to preserve the people's liberty

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Of which Britannicus shall ne'er deprive you.

Brit. Upon my word and honour, good citizens.
It shall be even as friend Otho speaks

2nd Cit. Sir, all that you have said we'll bear in
mind and consider your rights.

Brit. This is not hopeful.

Otho. I've a mind to abuse
These heartless rascals. But, come, leave them here!
Another opportunity we'll seek.

Brit. I trust you and go in hope, good citizens!

[*Exit. Britannicus and Otho.*]

Enter Ligarius and Velutus.

Vel. You traitors! what have you been plotting
here

With those with whom you should not speak at all?

Lig. It was a bargain of hire, was it not?
You slaves! beware, before you sell yourselves!

1st Cit. It was neither a bargain nor a treason;
we were only listening to Britannicus pleading his
cause!

Lig. You listen to a bastard who is no more
The son of Claudius than any of you here.

For what could Massalina's children be
A small grain better than base bastards all?

1st Cit. We never thought of that.

Vel. Think of it now and stand not in the streets
To listen to such bastards any more.

Go make a heap and walk through all the streets

The Tragedy of Nero 27

And shout that every man in Rome may hear,
Loud as the pleadings of a sudden thunder,
"All glory come to Nero, our emperor" !

3rd Cit. Shall we supplant Britannicus ?

Lig. What bastard speaks for others of his kind ?
Britannicus is not whom Romans want,
But Nero, Nero only. Now go along,
And through the streets proclaim him so,
Or by the gods you shall not breathe an hour !

1st Cit. Here appears Nero himself.

Enter Nero with Burrhus.

Cits. Hail, emperor !

Lig and Vel. All glory come to you.

Nero. And equal joy to you, my faithful friends !

Cits. He calls us friends ; let us cheer him
again.

[They all go shouting followed by the tribunes.]

Bur. See now what Burrhus would not do for
you.

Now let me to the Senate haste at once
That I may have the new approval sealed.

Nero. Give me your hand, dear friend ! give me
your hand !

Let Nero live assured in your true love
And there's no danger in the whole of Rome
But he will overcome. A part of me
Will I regard you hence and call you king.

[Exit both.]

28 The Tragedy of Nero

SCENE 4.—*The Capitol. Enter two Officers with cushions.*

1st Offi. This day Rome is to be crowned.

2nd Offi. And who is that minion of the stars?

1st Offi. Why, man, Nero! Heard you not the people shout, "Long live Nero!" "All joy and glory to our emperor Nero," till they deafened the ears as with the sound of the booming sea?

2nd Offi. Is Britannicus disbarred for being a minor?

1st Offi. That and many other reasons they urge. The children of Massalina, an eternal slander of the name of woman, are not looked upon as legitimate.

2nd Offi. Meseems there is some force in that argument. How some mothers curse their children! Upon my soul, my heart goes out to poor Britannicus.

1st Offi. Aye, it is very hard to be condemned because born of a woman condemned. Even Seneca is won over to Nero's side, but, be sure, not without good reason.

2nd Offi. Let's break off; here they come!

Enter Senate, who take their seats; enter Velatus and Ligarius, who also take theirs; enter Burrhus, Seneca, Lucan, Britannicus and Otho.

Bur. Most reverend Sires, give me leave to speak,

The Tragedy of Nero 29

Since we have met together to approve
Who shall this day be the crowned head of Rome.

Sen. Speak, honest Burrhus, prefect of the
guards,

And readily we will give you our ears.

Bur. It being in the mind of every man
On whom shall the succession of Claudius fall,
The people and the guards and other elders
Together with the subject provinces
Have ere-long chosen Nero for the throne.
Nor will you find his pretext weak and void,
If you will argue his relation well,
That Claudius had adopted him his son,
And set all Massalina's heirs aside,
Who have left on her issues such a taint
As to disbar them all from the succession.

Brit. Man, didst thou never learn to rule thy
tongue?

Sen. Britannicus, let Burrhus finish first.

Bur. 'Tis urged that Nero be proclaimed at
once,

For so did Claudius on his death-bed will.
And who would doubt that such a wish as this
Was chief of all the wishes he would wish,
And must be in his mind then uppermost !
There is but one man and that man is Nero.
Here's the approval of the provinces

(*handing papers*).

As for the guards I am their guarantee,

30 The Tragedy of Nero

And for the people let the tribunes speak.

Vel. and Lig. To what the prefect says we both
do witness.

Lig. The people would have none but Nero
only.

Who sits so firmly in their heart of hearts
That nothing would succeed to drive him thence.
They fain would sacrifice their lives, they say,
Were it but to see the crown on his head.

Vel. And they already through the streets of
Rome

Go hailing Nero as their emperor.

You must have heard their joyous shoutings, too,
On your way hither.

Senate. Aye that we all did.

Senator. But what says Seneca, and Lucan what?

Sen. Upon the good word of good Agrippina,
Maintaining Claudius on his death-bed willed
That Nero should succeed him on the throne,
I cannot but approve the common choice.
Let Nero wear the crown and rule in peace,
Since every voice is lifted up for him.

Luc. Aye, let him rule, the safest for us all ;
For we fear not oppression from his sway,
When we remember who his tutor was
And who will guide him in the government.

Otho. They spake for Nero and you suffered
them.

Now suffer me to speak for Britannicus.

The Tragedy of Nero 31

I ask you in the names of all our gods,
Upon what proven ground do you disbar.
In favour of this man, the rightful heir ?
Well you may the dead Massalina blame,
Though all your censure would be idle now.
But by what rule of your philosophy
The son you punish for his parent's crimes ?
What Claudius must have willed or must not
have,

Deserves not as much as a passing thought,
Since there's no confirmation of his word.
O you who are more grave than all of us,
Whose virtue is that justice must be done,
Will you such an injustice justify ?

Senator. We have considered all the pros and
cons,

And we decide unanimously here
That Nero is the man to be proclaimed.

Senate. This is the proclamation of the Senate.

Brit. Rome ! thou art purchased by an upstart-
buyer,

And thou hast shamed thy fathers in their graves !
Among the common heap I found not one,
When I did plead to them my native claim,
Towards my cause inclined. I see it now.
You are not elders, only purchased slaves,
Who readily have sold your consciences.
You may enrich your buyers with the crown,
But you degrade yourselves before your gods !

32 The Tragedy of Nero

Go, take the crown! I fling it at your feet!
I fear not, the gods will stand up for me.
Come, come away, this is no place for us (*to Otho*).
[*Exit Britannicus and Otho.*]

Senator. Now, Burrhus! let Nero be sent for at once.

Luc. I will go fetch him.

Bur. Soft, he saves your trouble,
For here in person he appears.

Enter Nero attended by some guards.

Welcome!

The senators with all agreeable
Proclaim you emperor and wish you life
(*gives him the crown*).

Senate. All happiness and glory come to Nero.

Nero. With your permission do I take the crown,
And while I wear it, I will not forget
To whom I am indebted for the gift
(*puts the crown on*).

Senate and all. Long live Nero! [*Exit all.*]

SCENE 5.—*A Hall in the Palace.*

Enter Agrippina and Agerinus.

Agri. Agerinus!

Ager. Here, madam!

Agri. Where are the girls?

The Tragedy of Nero 33

Ager. Mean you Octavia and Antonia?

Agri. Aye.

Ager. Methinks this moment they both weep together,

In mutual sympathy, tears of agony.

No sooner by the palace did they hear

The people hoot and hiss Britannicus,

And cry out shame upon their mother's name,

Than staring at each other they stood, amazed,

As for the first a stranger at the sea,

Stands on the deck in mute perplexity,

Seeing the seamen working by the signs

Of Nature's elements, to him all wonder.

They stared and then for words they wept down tears.

And O, when I beheld those baby drops,

I felt a dewy moisture in mine eyes,

And catching the contagion, wept myself.

Agri. It was good of thee to have wept for them.

But think not too much on these orphan girls,

And leave them to their good or evil stars ;

And think of nothing, since to me thou owest

The freedom of thy life, but serving me.

Ager. I know I stand beholden to your Grace.

And if occasion come to prove myself,

I also know how to discharge my debt.

Command me aught you would, and I obey.

Agri. Let the occasion come and I'll try thee.

But art thou glad to see my Nero shine ?

34 The Tragedy of Nero

Ager. Glad? That is no word; I am overjoyed!
But here comes Seneca.

Agri.

Begone sirrah!

[*Exit Agerinus.*]

Enter Seneca.

Tell me, Seneca! is Nero crowned at last?

Sen. Crowned, madam?

Agri. Then where doth he stay away?

Sen. Among the people at the market-place,
That they may gaze and wonder and wondering
gaze,

As the sheep gaze and wonder at the moon.

Agri. Do you grudge him the people's adoration?

Sen. Were I his rival, then had I cause.

But seeing my behaviour in the matter,

Your kindness could have spared me the offence.

Agri. Be not so quick to take offence, good friend!

You do not think I would offend your hairs,

Which now I doubly honour and revere,

Knowing who helped him to the seat of splendour.

Sen. I only pray to gods that he may rule,

As it becomes a Roman emperor,

With that stern mildness and that righteousness

Which are the chiefest virtues in a king,

And never trample on their liberty,

Nor touch th' established charters of the people,

That they may never say, who talk of it,

That Nero was installed by flatterers,

And the old Seneca made one of them.

The Tragedy of Nero 35

Agri. The expectations you have formed of him
I henceforth will, be sure, consider it
My duty to inspire him to fulfil.
The mind which with your teaching is imbued,
And the young spirit which hath imbibed your own,
So full of modest virtues and excellence,
Will fail not to shine in so fit a place.

Sen. And if he shine according as I hope,
Then nothing there is left for Seneca
That he would wish above this wish devout.

Agri. Doubt not that Nero will fulfil your wish.
Look, there he comes! There mark how he is
greeted!

O, my Rome, thou hast crowned a god to-day!
I pray you now depart, and give me leave
Freely to gratify a mother's joy. [*Exit Seneca.*]

•
Enter Nero.

So comes my shining son, the Sun of Rome!
Let me kiss you; I joyed not half so well
When you were born, as I do joy this day.
Meseems I see a divinity adorned,
And dropt from the skies as a boon to earth.
Rome registers this her immortal day,
And all the gods sit smiling in their heav'ns,
While my heart overflows with ecstasy,
And like the roaring ocean leaps and bounds.

Nero. Your joy, dear mother mine, is premature,
For I am not yet on my throne assured.

36 The Tragedy of Nero

Agri. What do you mean ?

Nero. Doth not my rival live.

Agri. Fear not that, soon will I remove your fear.

Nero. O darling mother ! (*embraces her*).

Agri. Love me ever, Nero !

What boots it now to live without your love ?

Love me and recompense my services :

Let me receive, bid forth, ambassadors ;

Give me a voice in matters of the state,

And let Rome and the provinces behold

My head on every coin beside your own !

I know you will not grudge me that, will you ?

Nero. Already ambitious, empress Agrippina ?

Agri. He mocks me, he mocks me, O gods !

Nero. Come, come !

You shall be empress while I'm emperor !

Agri. Say that again, and I will worship you.

Nero. You shall be empress, while I'm emperor !
There, satisfied ?—Hush ! hush ! here comes Sabina.

Enter Poppæa Sabina.

Sab. Ah ! how I envy you that diadem ;
That on your head sits with a god-like grace !

Transforming Nero in a Jupiter,

And making me transported at the sight !

And now bethink you of your promises.

First let your wife Octavia be divorced,

And then lewd Otho be dismissed the court.

Nero. This side, Poppæa ! mother, take you this !

The Tragedy of Nero 37

That thus may Nero go from earth to hell,
His evil spirits walking side by side.

[*Exit all, Nero in the middle and Agrippina and Sabina each on either side of him.*]

ACT II.

SCENE I.—*A Room in the Palace.*

Enter Antonia and Octavia.

Ant. O woe to us, Octavia! woe to us
That Nero holds the sceptre in his hands,
No instrument of tempered government,
But a resistless rod of tyranny,
Which will be tainted with all blood on blood.
Fear him as you would fear some wildest beast,
Let by a chance out of his den abroad.
That you could love him passes my belief,
A fit companion for the fiends of hell.
Yet could you see a limit to your love,
But the depth of the hatred which I bear
This human monster you can never gauge.

Oct. Hate him not, for he is my husband still.

Ant. O would to gods some meanest of the mean
Had been your husband rather than this man.
Say did he ever bear you any love,
Or ever give you one of those sweet looks
Which on the lost Sabina he bestows?

38 The Tragedy of Nero

They purchased you, dear sister, they purchased
you,

And Claudius, our father, never dreamt
That he was selling his own daughter away.

Oct. I understand you not, Antonia dear !

Ant. Foul Agrippina on our father thrust
The monster she hath given to the world,
And for his closer claim upon his love,
Upon his title and his name imperial,
She in the bargain bought Octavia too
To make his way more easy to the throne.
O my Britannicus ! when thou dost live,
Antonia's prayers will be all for thee !
Think what a pity it is, dear Octavia !
That in the order of the world he came
Two summers after the usurper's time.

Oct. That is the greatest pity of it all.

O do not for a moment think, Antonia,
That Nero's wife rejoices in his fate !
Who would rejoice for him who hates injustice ?
Britannicus must yet trust to the gods,
If he would ever have his wrong redressed.
It is I, O Antonia ! it is I
That am than any else more fearful now.
How mutely have I borne my Nero's hate,
His sneers, and his unjustified rebuffs,
An now more mutely must I bear his yoke,
When none shall hear me or dare to check him.
O woe is me ! Antonia, woe is me !

The Tragedy of Nero 39

Ant. If your Antonia's arms can comfort you,
Come, nestle there and with love will I warm you.

Oct. Ah! how warm do I feel within your fold!

Ant. Could I but speak my thoughts to you!—

Hush, hush!

Oct. Antonia! why from me this strange aloof-
ness?

Ant. Am I quite safe, think you? Perhaps I
speak

Not to my sister, but to Nero's wife.

If it be so, sure then am I not safe.

Oct. How poor is your trust in me, dear
Antonia!

Trust me a little more, and I will prove
More constant in my silence than you hope,
Though women's stomachs are, they say, too light,
And cannot hold what they have taken in.
Speak, and your secrets let me all partake!

Ant. Is none by here?

Oct. None.

Ant. Come, I'll whisper you!
I have suspicions on our father's death.

Oct. O gods?

Ant. That they precipitat'd his end.

Oct. If your suspicions ever be assured,
Though they may light upon my husband's head,
Let Nero and his mother be accurst!

Ant. Not so loud, dear Octavia, not so loud!
The palace walls have a tongue to inform,

40 The Tragedy of Nero

Though you dreamt not, what's going on within.
I do believe there was foul play behind,
A king can guard himself against assassins,
And the rebellious subjects in his land,
But not against a false intriguing wife.

Oct. I am disposed to do you credit, sister,
For I have seen them with their arms across,
And always counted it as dangerous,
Fixed in one place, and sitting opposite,
As thoughtful and as silent and as grave
As players over a hard game of chess,
Determining the next move.

Ant. Ah! their next move!
He and his mother know what that will be.
No soul in Rome hath but a thought on it.
Hate him, hate him; it is not in your nature
To love a monster.

Oct. But I do love him.

Ant. Then your blind love will drive you to
despair.

Oct. Is there no hope of any sunshine yet?
But how can I be happy with the man
Who hath my father's blood upon his hands?

Ant. Hush! hush! no more of it, 'tis mere
suspicion.

Enter Nero.

Nero. Octavia! (*They both looked startled.*)

Come aside! [*Exit Antonia.*]

The Tragedy of Nero 41

Oct. What is your pleasure?

Nero. What were you whispering?

Oct. No whisperings,

Only exchanging of our sympathies.

Nero. Nay, rather say of serpent secret hissings.

Oct. Octavia hath no fangs; she never bit

A friend or foe.

Nero. Perchance she's being taught.

What subject could have been for thee and her

For mutual converse?

Oct. My unhappiness.

O, Nero, Nero! am I not unhappy?

Shall I be ever happy?

Nero. If we part.

Oct. What do you mean?

Nero. That thou and I must part.

Oct. Ah me! wherefore?

Nero. For so am I resolved.

Octavia from her Nero is divorced.

Oct. Divorced? And on what ground?

Nero. Thy barrenness.

With men of common sort it well might pass,

But to an emperor, and one like me,

No curse is greater than the barren curse.

In sooth, Octavia! thou charm'st me no more,

When sweet Sabina stands before mine eyes,

The centre round which all my being revolves,

Th' supreme goddess of my love and worship.

To me she is more than Adonis was

42 The Tragedy of Nero

To Venus or the youthful Endymion
To Cynthia !

Oct. O curséd, curséd woman !

Nero. Curse her not, girl ! thou art not half so
good.

Oct. There's no dearth of good women in the
world,

But for yourself one of these to obtain
Is as hard a task as to make a choice
Among the equal-shining stars, or pick
A diamond from an equal-valued set,
Or choose an angel from the angels' host.
O ! all my life I have been good to you,
As firm and constant in my sacred troth,
As is a star fixed in the firmament.
When was the time when I begrudged your love
That you should bear me so unbearably hard ?
Nor have I been too happy in my life,
That I must undergo adversity,
Lest I be spoiled by too much happiness.
O never did I prosper in your love,
Never, O never ! and yet to myself
My griefs I kept, though speaking them at once
I might have found redress. You spurned me oft,
Nor was it seldom in my father's time
That you used me as masters use their slaves.
But I not for a moment did complain,
And for all your hate I did give you love,
And now it comes that I am cast away,

The Tragedy of Nero 43

As if I were a thing of use no more.
Think of my youth and be more merciful !

Nero. Ungrateful thing ! in parting thee from me
Do I not show thee mercy that thou ravest ?
Octavia ! thou art young and beautiful,
Though to Sabina black as winter-fog,
And it is like someone might pick thee yet.

Oct. But not before I have been picked by death.
What other face I doated on but yours ?
What other eyes but yours did I adore ?
What other lips but yours have touched mine own ?
What man did e'er profane my marriage-vows,
That like a toy, short-used, you cast me off ?
I woke not in the morn but my first thought
Was not upon the rising sun but you ;
I slept not in the night but my last thought
Was not upon my sleep, but the new day.
O Nero, Nero ! Though you love me not
I love you still. Look ! thus upon my knees,
And with tears which mine eyes have never wept,
I beg you, Nero ! not to cast me off.

Nero. Such thousand prayers would be bootless
all,

For once when Nero wills, he is not moved
By such a trifle as a woman's tears.
So sued the friends of Cæsar on their knees
For freeing Cimber from his banishment,
But like an anchored ship he stood unmoved,
Fixed in his purpose never to be swayed.

44 The Tragedy of Nero

'Tis only for the base to will and vary,
But with the like of me once willed is done,
So when I say that thou wilt be divorced,
Thou art at once. Yet I will not be called
The despot which thou thinkest me to be.
The Senate will hear thee and arbitrate ;
Prepare thee, therefore, with thy pleading speech.

Oct. Go there yourself, I will not to the Senate,
For are they not the creatures of your purse :
Base slaves, who hang upon your smiles and favours,
As if that was the nectar which they drank ?
What, shall I be a slave among these slaves—
I, who am no less than an emperor's daughter ?
Can you forget so soon who Octavia is ?
Can you forget my birth, my rank, my pride ?
Can you forget I am an emperor's wife,
That you would see me fall as low as dust
For them to laugh and tread upon my pride ?
Who hath no pride is a perpetual slave.
Go there yourself and have your suit approved,
And be a tyrant now that Claudius is dead.

Nero. What, dardest thou to look into my face
With a tongue so bold and impertinent,
Who wast but now as low as these my feet ?
Thou knowest I could crush thee like a worm,
And with a clutch could strangle thee to death,
For Nero moved is like an ocean roaring.
Down on thy knees again and kiss my feet,
Or, by the gods, Octavia breathes no more !

The Tragedy of Nero 45

Ah! do these thunder-torrents shake thee now?

Oct. Ne'er was a soldier frightened by the
cannons

As I am by your dagger-words-and looks.

Nero. Then am I melted. Come near. I'll hold
thee,

And out of pity give thee the last kiss.

Oct. Away, away! You dare not touch me now.

Go, throw your pity to the slaves and dogs;

Go, keep your kisses for those impure lips

That have your soul profaned, that you may curse

Her name when she hath trampled on your own.

Give me a little lust, that's all I want.

O gods, O gods! let me not live after this;

Hear me and grant my suit, immortal gods—

Hear me and grant my suit! [*Exit distractedly.*]

Nero. And better for thee

If such a solemn suit be granted soon.

Enter Sabina.

Sab. I saw Octavia in distraction pass;

I think her courage did not bear her up.

Nero. As low as to my feet she pleaded me,

With tears, that her divorce may be repealed.

Then on the very ground I stood upon

She put her lips in frantic adoration,

And called me names which gods would envy me.

Sab. Throughout the trial you did stand unmoved?

Nero. Aye, as a post.

46 The Tragedy of Nero

Sab. That is Nero indeed.

And praised you of my beauty in her ears?

Nero. Praised it? While I was chanting of thy beauty,

Methought I saw the goddess Venus move

Uneasy on her throne, and bend on me,

With fixed brows, contracted in a frown.

And had Apollo heard my song of thee

He would have torn for shame his sweetest rhyme.

Sab. Ah! let me beg of you a loving kiss.

Nero. More exquisite than the nectarean juice
Is thy sweet kiss! Let me kiss thee again.

Sab. You will not cast me off, but love me
always?

Nero. Sweet, mine! did I not love thee at first
sight?

Sab. Love at first sight may vanish like a dream,
Or may abide as an eternal passion.

Nero. Thou shalt see mine is an eternal love.

Sab. Which in the amplest measure is repaid.
None else shall in my love ingraft himself,
For you are deeply rooted in my heart,
Like germs of an imperishable oak.

Nero. But what about thy husband Otho?

Sab. Husband!

No more my husband he than she your wife.

Well may you now expel him from the court,

And not without a cause.

Nero. What cause, Poppæa?

The Tragedy of Nero 47

Sab. Why, doth he not profess to love Antonia?
As often spurned as oft he hath advanced,
And she, with a deep hate, repays his love.

Nero. Is that enough to satisfy them all?

Sab. Why do you care for others' satisfaction?
Expel the man, and let me be appeased,
For sometimes on his visage do I see
Such a black look as makes me fear the man.
If you love me, then let me be at ease.

Nero. And thou wilt love and worship none
but me?

Sab. Now, Nero! is not that superfluous?
Whom would Poppæa love but Jupiter?
You have a face which men would envy most,
And women at first sight adore.

Nero. My sweet!
My mother! I cannot mistake that step.

Sab. (*going*). Your mother is ambitious, beware!
[*Exit Sabina.*]

Nero. Believe me, let a woman be possessed,
And there's no devil in the hell of hells,
But he must own her greater than himself.
One left me now, another comes along.

Enter Agrippina.

Well, mother, what fresh tidings for your son?

Agri. That from this day more soundly you shall
sleep.

Nero. Is that true, mother?

48 The Tragedy of Nero

Agri.

Nothing truer, son !

Britannicus will trouble you no more.

Nero. What, so soon as that?

Agri.

Look you thus surprised

That I a woman could despatch a thing

Sooner and easier than a man? O Nero!

Why would your mother sin, if not for you?

If not to see the crown upon your head

As fixed as is a hook upon a beam,

And all your subjects crouch before your feet?

O Nero, Nero ! if I could only live

To see the day when all the world would stand

And gaze upon you in mute wonderment

As gaze the gaping seers upon the stars,

Least understanding what their shining means.

Nero. Why, mother ! am I not adored already ?

You should have seen me at the market-place,

Where all the people stood with gaping mouths

As if great Jupiter had left his heaven

And paid an early visit to the earth.

And even Octavia, spurned and kicked away,

Knelt down adoring and adoring knelt.

See loves me for my beauty, poor, poor thing!

Agri. Nero ! already you are grown too vain.

Nero. Vain, mother? Ha! You wrong me there—you jest.

Agri. Go you to-morrow at the market-place

And there among the people distribute

Your customary heaps of corn and gold,

The Tragedy of Nero 49

For these are things that to the vulgar mind
Are as precious as to the king his crown,
And vulgar hearts are sooner won by gold
Than poets by the beauties of the skies,
That they be pacified before they say
Britannicus too soon did follow Claudius.

Nero. Upon my soul, mother! You are
wonderful,

More fit to rule than any man in Rome.

Agri. Give me a part of th' ruling government,
And my ambition shall be satisfied.

Nero. I am not destitute of gratitude.
Yes, you shall have your wish.

Agri. Let me kiss you.
Now will I make things ready for to-morrow.

[*Exit Agrippina.*]

Nero. "Your mother is ambitious, beware!"
This was Poppæa's hissing in mine ears;
And that too with a finger lifted up,
As if to warn me of some fearful fate.
It is the touch and voice of nature sets
A bar between the conscience and the act.
What act? Name it not, Nero, name it not,
Lest earth and heavens might shake with thunder-
bolts.

And yet, who knows, it once might come to that.
Hush, hush, thou wicked Nero! Hold thy tongue,
And do not hatch thy serpent-thoughts so soon.

[*Exit.*]

50 The Tragedy of Nero

SCENE 2.—*A Hall in the Palace.*

Enter Seneca on one side, on the other Lucan.

Luc. How now, brother, where are you bound?

Sen. To Nero.

Luc. Why, then a favour let me beg of you.

Volumnius and Vantelius wait without,
Whose names are not quite strangers to your ears.
Will you, if Nero be in his fond humour,
Lead both of them to be introduced?

Sen. That I will, be sure.

Luc. Brother, for this much thanks.

Sen. Await me here; — but there he comes
himself.

Enter Nero.

Nero. Well, what are brothers here discoursing
on?

Sen. If I am pardoned, sir, I may commend

Two men of note unto your gracious eye.

Nero. What are they?

Sen. One a musician, one a painter.

Luc. And sculptor too.

Nero. You also know them well?

Luc. I do, my liege!

Nero. What is the painter's worth?

Luc. His brush by one small touch can spread
a cloud

Over a face and take its sunshine off,

The Tragedy of Nero 51

And as soon change a gloomy countenance
Into a smiling sun.

Nero. And the musician's?

Luc. He, my liege, is the sweetest of his strain,
Who strikes such notes upon his instrument
That all the nature stands up listening,
Apparently enchanted by his strains.

Nero. So much the men! Go fetch them in at
once [Exit *Lucan.*

To you, dear Seneca, I owe these tastes.

Sen. Your gratitude, my lord, doth flatter me,
And make me more than ever proud of you.
You shall do well to patronise these men
Who with your aid may leave their names behind.

Re-enter Lucan with Volumnius and Vantelius.

Nero. You both are welcome here; which is
the painter?

Vant. My noble liege! your humble servant
here.

Nero. What wilt thou do to serve thy emperor?

Vant. By painting Nero as a being divine
In various figures from my brain drawn out,
I will make him the envy of the gods;
And by engraving him upon a stone,
As never was the mightiest Julius carved,
I will make him a lasting monument
That even strangers passing by may gaze
And wonder not at the art but at the man.

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Nero. Good, good! thou shalt have gold. And
what wilt thou?

Vol. I will make you the song of all my songs,
And as far as the power of art can go,
Will weave your name in sweetest harmonies,
And with the sounds enchant the very air.
And every virgin in our mighty Rome
Shall sing your name and worlds shall echo it.

Nero. As good, and as good thy reward shall be.
Here, Seneca, let both of them have gold.

[*Exit Seneca, Vantelius, and Volumnius.*]

Now, Lucan, I will be your rhyming rival.
The honey of the muse so charms my soul
That I am tempted to approach her shrine,
Although thereby beside my course I go,
As seamen seeing something strange at sea
Are lured to haul up to the place of wonder.
Then will I try the canvas and the brush;
I can conceive strange figures in my brains
And draw out fantasies most weird and wild.

Luc. Than he no man more grievously doth err
Who thinks he can be all in everything.
Well may he aim upon a thousand goals,
But he will miss, straying wide of the mark,
Nay, lose that wherein he was born to shine.
A poet may excel in poetry,
Philosophers in their philosophy,
And so each genius in his element.
For Nature who prefers economy

The Tragedy of Nero 53

To lavishness pours not all on one man,
But makes most just divisions of her gifts,
And to each man his proper sphere assigns.

Nero. No more! I know that better than you do.
What is your last verse?

Luc. Love and Beauty.

Nero. Good!

I like the theme; let it be passed for mine.

Luc. Put your name to it?

Nero. Or a pseudonym

To stir the breath of wonder for a while.

Luc. But your grace would not shine by others'
light?

Nero. No question, man! go let me have my
will. [*Exit Lucan.*

The fellow puts on airs and must be curbed.

I envy him the praises that he wins.

The hearts of all the people must be mine

And not belong to any, though in part,

But O! that face!—I must avoid it now.

[*Exit Nero.*

Enter Agrippina.

Agri. What, so soon, weary of thy mother, boy?
So soon grown alien from thy mother's heart
That like a shadow thou steal'st away from her!
Ah, this!

O mothers, mothers! sin not for your sons,
And if you do let them not know you do,
Lest with the knowledge of the wiles you teach

54 The Tragedy of Nero

Your sons might turn and use those means on you.
This means not well, nor can it be for good.
Thy Nero now is getting dangerous ;
Good Agrippina ! be on thy guard !

[*Exit Agrippina.*

SCENE 3.—*Market-Place.*

Enter Ligarius and Velutus.

Lig. Upon my soul I am not satisfied
With th' sudden death of young Britannicus.

Vel. Why, good friend, that is as much as to say
That there was mischief wrought upon his life.

Lig. In sooth I do smack something of the kind.
The people in the streets too talk of it
And censure our wisdom in our choice
Of Nero.

Vel. Then we must silence them at once.

Lig. That Nero will not fail to do himself
With further gifts to them of corn and gold.
But, Velutus, no man were safe in Rome
If Nero lost remorse and used his power.

Vel. Then we do know what power we can use.
Let us wait and watch the while.—Here they come.

Enter several citizens.

You knaves, what mean your pratings in the streets
About Britannicus ?

1st Cit.

That he was rid.

The Tragedy of Nero 55

For so the rumour runs from mouth to mouth.

Lig. You rumour-wedded fellows, know you not
Your trade it is to dig, to sow and mend,
And not question aught about the state?

Vel. You chose your emperor and now you
stand

Accusing him of this and that, ungrateful.

One word to him and whither shall you fly?

2nd Cit. You threw him on us and we held
him up.

Vel. Slight fellow? hide from me thy saucy
face,

Or by the spade thou holdest in thy hands,

I will plough thee as thou dost plough the ground.

3rd Cit. Make way, here comes the emperor.

Enter Nero attended by Burrhus and the guards.

The people shout.

Nero. What will my people have to be assured
That I do love them with a love so strong
That I would see them happy like myself?

1st Cit. The love and kindness of your majesty
Which we appreciate more than gifts of gold.

Nero. What a sly fellow, Burrhus? I like
him—

Because my people do not care for gold

But for their emperor's love, they shall have gold,

And here will they taste of his charity.

[*Gives them corn and gold.*]

56 The Tragedy of Nero

Cits. Long live Nero! Long live Nero!

Nero. Out of my rich regard for my dear people
These gifts have I bestowed, not flattery,
Upon your heads. What say the tribunes now?

Lig. Your majesty hath a right royal heart,
So full of love and kindness for us all.

Vel. Whose constancy, my liege, is more than
aught

Your majesty would wish or care to have.

Nero. May the gods keep my people ever happy.

Cits. May the gods keep Nero ever happy.

[*A shout without.*]

Nero. What mean these shoutings on the street,
good Burrhus?

Bur. Sire, it is Lucan lauded on the pulpit,
Reciting to the mob his last sweet rhyme.

Nero. Good proof of the man. Come make
thither our way.

[*Exit Nero and Burrhus and the
guards. The people shout.*]

Lig. Come hither, slave? What didst thou say
but now?

Thou lovest kind and sweet looks more than gold,
And having had thy share of royal smiles,
Let me have thy gold.

1st. Cit. I am sorry, sir!

It is the emperor's gift, and I must keep it.

Lig. The emperor's gift! How are you changed,
slaves?

The Tragedy of Nero 57

But now you were a discontented rabble,
And now you fall to trickish merriment
Like little children at the sight of toys.

Vel. Now get you home and lock up all your
tongues,
If sparks of gratitude be left in you.
Citr. Long live Nero.

[*Exeunt.*

SCENE 4.— *A Room in the Palace.*

Enter Octavia and Otho.

Otho. Weep not, Octavia, weep not! Dry
your tears :
Your little drops would make me weep with you,
As if I came to weep not to soothe you.

Oct. O, Otho! I am miserable now!
The Senate too have granted the divorce
And left me naked in a cruel world.

Otho. Who ever laughed that did not weep at
last?
In misery do not despair, but think
There are more miserable in the world,
And the thought will console you. Come, cheer
up!

Oct. Those who have learnt to suffer well can
bear,
But I who am a novice in the school
Of adversity can only break my heart,

58 The Tragedy of Nero

And weep and weep. Have pity on me, gods!
For I am left all friendless in the world.

Otho. Not while a friend would yet protect your
head.

Oct. No, no! I have no friend now left to me
Save my Antonia, my sole comforter,
But she, too, is as helpless as myself.

Otho. Octavia? Otho loves you, if not Nero.
And if you would not to yourself be blind,
Leave kin and everything and fly with me.

Oct. Away, away, you serpent of a man,
Think you I am made of Sabina's stuff
For every lusty man to purchase me?
You tempted my Antonia and were balked,
And now you come to tempt a miserable heart.
O virtue, virtue! whither art thou fled?

Enter Nero behind.

Nero. Ah! that's good! (*aside.*)

Otho. Do not philosophize at such a time,
But take your future as I give it you.
Sabina have I driven from my side,
For now she is as good as Nero's wife.
Fly with me and leave virtue to itself.

Oct. Nay, virtue in a man shines like the stars.
He who hath virtue in his soul doth need
No safer armour, and armed as I am
With virtue, I do not want your protection.

Otho. I would brook hell to steal a kiss from you.

The Tragedy of Nero 59

Nero. Villain! steal away from Rome, or by
the gods

Thou shalt not breathe another day on earth.

Thou art as poisonous as the hornéd viper,

And I will soon despatch thee to thy kind.

Out of my sight, serpent, out of my sight.

[*Exit Otho.*]

A merry time of stealthy amours, girl!

Oct. Come you to mock me in my misery?

Nero. I come to soothe thee with philosophy.

Oct. If the philosophy which you are taught,
With which you come to soothe my aching heart,

Can teach you to inflict a mortal wound

Upon th' woman who was your second self,

And justify your monstrous cruelty,

Go, throw it to the dogs! I will none of it.

Nero. The Senate have divorced thee.

Oct.

Why tell me that?

Who did not know who knew your senators

That what you sued them would be granted you,

Though it were to afflict each man in Rome

With plagues and tortures never known as yet.

Nero. Tempt not my fury with thy loathsome
mouth,

Or I will tear to pieces thy fair flesh.

Thy thoughtless ravings stir the beast in me.

Oct. All angels blend their sympathy divine,

And gods weep with a weeping innocent.

But you, O Nero! You do stand unmoved,

60 The Tragedy of Nero

Nor see the river streaming down my cheeks,
As if you were not made of mortal flesh
But of some substance hard as adamant.
O would to gods that I could curse your name !
Gods only know what bitter curses rise
Upon my lips, and how I smother them,
For I do know what once you were to me.
O Nero ! you but trifled with my heart,
Like little children with their trivial toys.
And as from wantonness they break their toys,
You broke my heart, as if it were a plaything.

Nero. Octavia ! had I loved but thee alone,
I would have now been living like an angel.
But I am bargained out to other kind,
As different from thee as earth from heaven ;
And thus thou see'st the natural Nero is dead,
And from the ashes hath evolved and sprung
A fire as sulphurous as the fire of hell,
Not born with me, but by contagion caught
From those who are infected in the soul,
Like a disease post-natal. Curse me not,
And come not near Sabina, nor near me,
Unless thou wouldst be in the compact joined.
Thy mother was a fiend of her sex,
And how comes it thou differ'st so from her ?
Thou art as good and true as thou art fair,
And for thou art good thou art not for me.
I will despatch thee to a safer place,
Nor touch thy life unless thou aim'st at mine.

The Tragedy of Nero 61

Oct. Nay, take that first, it is a useless boon ;
And hear my prophecy before you go :
The woman who seduced you from Octavia
Shall die by you, and Nero by himself.

Nero. No matter, girl ! let me depart in peace,
Or I will come down on thee with my thunder.

[*Exit Nero.*]

Oct. Stand still, thou sun ! or drown thee in the
ocean,
And make on the earth a perpetual night.
The glorious sunshine of my life is gone !
Now let me set, dear gods ! now let me set,
And give me peace !

Enter Antonia.

Antonia ! Oh, Antonia !

Ant. O woe on woe ! death on death ! blood on
blood !

Britannicus, O my Britannicus !
Thou didst not die, I know, thou didst not die.
They plucked the flower and tore it in its fragrance.

Oct. Do not infect my heart with your suspicion.

Ant. It is true, O Octavia, it is true !
I never did suspect, but it came true,
And this is also true you soon will know,
Though now it doth not seem to bear that colour.
This man will be a hawk, a bird of havoc,
And by his terror will become so rank
That even his friends will brook him no more.

62 The Tragedy of Nero

I'll live to show it, and you'll live to see it.

Oct. O come, embrace me and kiss me your last.

Ant. My last! Why?

Oct. I am bid to leave this place.

Ant. O gods! let the foul tyrant be accurst!

Oct. Curse him not, curse him not; let him live happy!

Ant. Not curse that monster? Not curse that black fiend?

Octavia! dear Octavia, let him die!

Let him die ever and for ever curst!

O! the tears which thou weapest, dear Octavia!

Would melt the seas and give the stones a heart,

But they melt not his heart, more hard than stone.

Yet for thy sake I'll bend to him my knee,

And pray to him to let me go with thee.

Oct. Thereby you will but do more harm to me.

You have not felt the burning of his rage,

Or you would think the hottest sun was cool.

The waves by whirlwinds shaken never roar

Half so tempestuous as Nero stirred.

In spite of him he did melt and relent,

And praise me for my truth and honesty,

Though he scorned and condemned our mother's name.

Antonia, O Antonia! my heart breaks!

Ah me! love gives me leisure for to weep,

And it were better if I died at once.

The Tragedy of Nero 63

Antonia, O Antonia ! (*Throws herself in Antonia's arms.*)

Ant. O mother, mother ! how have you cursed
your children ! [*Exit both.*]

SCENE 5.—*An Orchard in the Palace.*

Enter Nero.

Should it be so ?

Is there no other way out of my fear
To let the bloody thoughts sleep in my heart,
But stab the very bosom that I sucked,
The bosom to which I had fondly clung,
Like tender petals round the feeding stem,
The bosom that did give me milk and life,
And nourish me as a part of its own self ?
Shall I run down blood from those very hands
That for my sake attainted their white palm
To put this crown upon my greedy head ?
If these I spare, I do not spare myself,
But put in them a voluntary sting
That might without a warning bite my heart.
Is there no way ? Then must I speak my mind ?
Aye, mother ! you must die—
Hush, hush ! the ground beneath me shakes and
trembles ;
The mute earth groans deeper than Prometheus,
And the thin air becomes as thick as blood,

64 The Tragedy of Nero

As thick and frozen as my hardened soul.
O Nero! Thy soul is fled to the beasts.
Nay, nay, nay, even among the beasts they have
Some nature's feeling—I am worse than these,
Who by this act do shame the brutish beasts.
Then must I change the name which Nature gave
me,
And call myself not son, nor either man,
But—what? She will tell me—Poppæa!

Enter Sabina.

Sab. Called you me?

Nero. Aye, from hell—but where
wert thou?

Sab. I was but coming here in search of you.

Nero. I never heard a sound of human steps.
Even the Devil for his entry knocks,
Even the serpent hisses while he comes,
But woman steals as treacherously as death,
With hell in every nether step she treads.

Sab. Am I then treacherous? Am I your hell?
I loved you as I would but love a god,
As woman never loved a man on earth;
I kissed and worshipped every step you walked,
And looked on honour with a careless eye,
And all for love; and this is all my meed.
Let me go, let me go; I am your devil.

Nero. Come, come, thou art my angel, sweet
Poppæa! (*Kisses her.*)

The Tragedy of Nero 65

Sab. How kisses reconcile a wounded heart ?

Nero. What led thee hither ?

Sab. What but your safety, Nero ?

Nero. By thy advice I have a guard about me,
And never do I visit her, unwatched.

Sab. I mean not that.

Nero. What else thou meanest, then ?

Sab. Your mother is ambitious, beware !

Nero. Why, look now how the serpent hisses hell.

Sab. But it is only for your safety, love !

Nero. What wouldst thou have me do ?

Sab. Be safe at once,
While safety could be had.

Nero. O fair Poppæa !
The blackness of thy heart doth compensate
For too much outward fairness in thy face.

Sab. You are frank almost to offensiveness.

Nero. What boots it, my dear, to be self-deceived ?
We never can hide our selves from ourselves,
And if there is no chance for us to rule
In heavens, let us be king in hell at least.

Sab. Self-safety is above all other thoughts.
What did they kill the mightiest Julius for
If not to check his over-grown ambition ?
Is not your mother as ambitious now ?
Ah ! think of it. Ambition hath no eyes,
And in its blindness tries to reach Olympus.
Now to be plain : let not your mother live.

Nero. O hell ! O hell !

66 The Tragedy of Nero

Sab. Nay, nay, invoke not hell,
There can be no hell in a cause so just.

Nero. Aye, thou art right, Poppæa! thou art
right ;
She must not live.

Sab. Now all the gods be praised.

Nero. But she is as much on her guard as I.
So well-versed in the art of poisoning,
She did, while here she stayed, take antidotes
To be forearmed against like treachery,
As generals, anticipating war,
Do keep their armies armed and full-equipped.

Sab. There is a man will do the thing for you.

Nero. Who is he, who is he?

Sab. One who hates her.

Nero. Anicetus?

Sab. He, your young tutor once,
Who long awaits your royal word to pass.

Nero. Who told thee that? How camest thou
to know

That he was hither bid upon this hour?

Sab. Questions again, while it is time for action !
Put all your soul in every word you speak,
And promise him large preference and gold,
For these are things that catch a greedy soul,
And stir it to the height of its foul thirst,
As the sharp and intoxicating drops
A sluggish stomach whet to appetite.
So set him on. Look, yonder comes the man.

The Tragedy of Nero 67

Call up the strongest part of all your nature,
And to your purpose stand as firm as rocks.

Nero. My purpose! Be sure 'twill not fall
from me,

For with hooks have I grappl'd it to my heart,
That I may stand to it with constancy.

Sab. Then will I trust you with the man alone.

[*Exit Sabina.*]

Nero. Why doth he come at such a niggard pace,
While I would have him fly to me on wings?

Enter Anicetus.

Come hither, sirrah, dost thou hate my mother?

Ani. Why should I speak? Your grace doth
know it well.

Nero. Sufficiently to satisfy thyself?

Ani. Sufficiently for anything, my liege!

Nero. Good; we have but one mind between
us both,

What means hast thou to keep her off for ever?

Ani. Could Burrhus lend me some of his guards,
It were as easy done as said, or thought.

Nero. Leave him, leave him, he is an honest man.
Canst thou not think of anything thyself?

Ani. I have but one recourse then left with me.

Nero. Let it be one that could speak for thy
genius,

And prove thee the inventor of the age.

Ani. My liege, I have with me a vessel built

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Of such contrivance as will answer well
Our purpose. It could be detached, afloat,
Not least suspected by the souls aboard,
And thus the portion split be drowned at once
Even in the midst of revelry around.
Methinks the very gods do favour us,
For now they hold the festivals at Baiz,
Which 'tis her custom always to attend.
Now lure her thither in the very ship,
And if your mother perish in the wreck,
As sure she will—no miracle could save her—
No man in Rome is so devoid of sense
As to impute a motive to a chance,
Well knowing all the perils at the sea.
You well may feign some filial show of love,
Build temples and erect some altars, too,
As an assurance of her memory.

Nero. I tell thee, hell would profit by thy
genius ;

I have not men but fiends for my friends.
To-morrow doth she come to visit me
From Antium ; our differences patched,
Myself will I conduct her to the shore
To ward her apprehension of our device.
Go, sirrah, go, and make things ready now.

[*Exit Anicetus.*]

Thus it is done, and thus I damn myself.
Let hell gape, but she must die, she must die.

[*Exit.*]

The Tragedy of Nero 69

ACT III.

SCENE I.—*A Room in Seneca's house.*

Enter Seneca and Burrhus.

Sen. Burrhus! things are not going as they should.

Look! Agrippina is swollen with ambition,
Outstretching it beyond the bourn of reason;
And Nero is so flattered by himself
That he hath learnt to slight our graver years,
As if he was the gravest of us all.

Bur. More Agrippina is to blame than he.
She styles herself the empress of our Rome,
And by the foreign powers acknowledged so,
Receives, grants, and despatches messages,
And hath her impress on our Roman coins,
Submitting him to her capricious will,
And he, it is but natural, rebels.
It is the mother makes the son rebel.
These are, so Nero oft complains to me,
Indignities with purpose heaped on him,
And for my part I do believe it so.
Nor is young Nero less ambitious.
What wonder, Seneca, that youth should be,
Like this exalted to the seat supreme,
And by the fire of ambition flamed,
As wayward and as changing as the winds?
Sen. If only we live not to rue the day

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When with this Nero's head our Rome we
crowned,

We need not, when we die, sigh for ourselves.

Or we shall be a curse to after times,

O Burrhus ! I would not for fear of the gods

Offend my soul.

Bur. Nor would I, Seneca.

What we have done we did, so strong convinced,

Regarding the children of Massalina

Not rightful to the throne.

Sen. You spoke but truth.

Yet I do fear me that it might go wrong.

Bur. Nay, let us hope ; things yet might change
for good.

To-day both feasting at the self-same board,

And tasting viands from the self-same dish,

The mother and the son will be one again.

There will be love exchanged, regrets expressed,

And all their natural friendship sealed once more.

This day she sails off to the festivals,

And after all their revelry is done,

The son escorts the mother to the shore.

Sen. May not the gods begrudge your pious
wish.

Bur. If after having once established it,

They break their mutual bond (the gods forbid !)

Then Rome might see some mischief set on foot.

Believe me, Seneca, to speak the truth,

Young Nero is not less ambitious now,

The Tragedy of Nero 71

And flattered by the power that he wields,
He scorns objection to his ministers,
Nay turns his face from them, rapt in himself,
As if he were communing with the gods.

Sen. Ah ! man seems fashioned but for vanity.
Look ! everything in nature is so humble,
For through itself it sees all nature's God.
But man alone, the proud, presumptuous man,
The creature of a day, nay of an hour,
A bubble that might without a warning burst,
And dream-like vanish in the vacant air,
From vanity looks upward to the skies,
And airs himself upon the throne of Jove.
If power and remorse are held apart,
The current of the things then goes awry.
Pray to the gods that Rome may never cry
"Woe worth the day when Nero got the crown."

Bur. Come, come, may the high gods avert this
curse. [*Exit both.*]

SCENE 2. *The shore. Several ships are lying in view, among them one most gorgeously decorated.*

Enter several Rowers.

1st Rower. Tell me, comrades, did you ever see the like of this ship ?

Several Rowers. By the sea-gods we never did.

1st Rower. Methinks it is a pity to dash such a beauty to pieces.

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2nd Rower. The greater pity is that we are elected to kill an empress.

3rd Rower. Ah me! how many graves will the waters make in a moment's time?

1st Rower. Why, fellow, the sea can accommodate a million and million times that million, and yet feel its stomach empty. But here comes Anicetus, the commander of the fleet.

Enter Anicetus.

Ani. Fellows, be sworn by your oars and by your gods to keep your word.

Rowers. We are sworn already, sir.

Ani. That's good then. Remember the warning. When the ship splits, have your eye on Agrippina, and if she escape immediate death, which she will not, I trust, strike her dead at once. Now I must be gone. Farewell. [*Exit Anicetus.*]

1st Rower. My heart cries within me when I see our comrades yonder, doomed to perish in the wreck.

2nd Rower. Why, are they not privy to the plot?

1st Rower. Nay, they are not. For their greater love of Empress Agrippina they are left out.

Enter more Rowers.

One of the latter. Make way, here come the empress and the emperor.

The Tragedy of Nero 73

Enter Nero and Agrippina attended by her women.

Nero. Then, my dear mother, must you bid farewell?

Agri. But while, dear son! for we shall meet as oft
As lovers parted meet and meet again,
While there is nature yet between them left,
Unless you hold your heart apart from mine.

Nero. Talk not of it, dear mother! talk not of it.
The future will repay for all the past
Which bitter past we now have drowned in Lethe.
The old affection rises in my heart,
By the beams of your radiant smiles revived.
O how I long to hold you to my heart!
Would that a chain were by to bind us both
Never to part us any more. O mother!

Agri. If I were apprehensive of some fate,
Your words would chase away my heavy fears.
I feel as if I have borne you but now
With all a mother's first joy and ecstasy.
If I have wronged you in my thoughtlessness,
Forgive me, Nero, with a filial kiss.

Nero. There, mother, a kiss more honest ne'er
was kissed.
Sons must bear with their parents' whims and
humours,
And rather than heat them must pacify.
Look on this ship like thrones of gods em-
bellished!

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Another such ne'er sailed on Roman seas.
In such a barge sat Egypt's queen, when she
Upon the Cyndus met Mark Antony ;
And I have read that all the waters gazed,
And mutely wondered at its gorgeousness,
Then from 'neath chanted maddest melodies.
Even such a ceremony will attend
Your voyage with a million courtesies.

Agri. How dazzling is the splendour to my
eyes !

How poor were thanks for such a signal mark.
But, Nero, wherefore should you honour me
So splendidly, when well you know
That in a trireme I am wont to sail ?

Nero. Shall Nero's mother have no different
note

To mark her from the common of her sex ?
Look, mother, look how all the heavens above,
As if to do you homage, blaze forth their fires !
The stars shall sing you in your merry course,
And all the sirens in the chorus join,
And winds and waves shall lie as calm as sleep,
Thus giving proof they know who is abroad.

Agri. How lovely sounds your music in mine
ears !

I seem to hear the mermaid's song already.
Farewell, my Nero ! fare thee well my child !
If gods be gracious we shall meet again.
Shall we ?

The Tragedy of Nero 75

Nero. As often, mother, as you wish.
Embrace, kiss me again and once again.

[They embrace each other, then Agrippina, followed by her women and the rowers, goes on the ship.]

Nero (aside). O mother, it is your last step I see!

[Agrippina takes her seat and the ship moves.]

Agri. Farewell, sweet child, farewell! Gods spare thee long!

Nero. Farewell, sweet mother, farewell till next we meet.

We shall meet no more *(aside)*.

[They wave their hands to each other, then the ship disappears.]

O my soul! she is gone, gone to her death!

Call her back, O gods! call my mother back!

Nay, nay, let her go; 'tis good, let her go!

O words! what charm you have to simulate!

Nero! Nero! thou shalt not sleep any more,

Awake for ever in a living hell. *[Exit Nero.]*

SCENE III.—*A Room in the Palace.*

Enter Sabina.

Sab. Agrippina no more! Sabina free!

How well it is! for by the loss of her

I gain her title, and her place and name.

Empress Sabina! ah, how sweet it sounds!

So will they shout and the woods echo it.

Poor Agrippina, I do pity you!

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Where will your pride and arrogance be now ?
Ah ! where indeed, your beauteous self will be
Before the waking of another day !
Perchance now may you sleeping be for ever.
Ah ! thus you die, and thus Sabina lives.
But grant ye gracious gods ! (if prayers of those,
Who have offended you, are not despised)
That Nero may not hate or turn from me,
For I love him above all earthly men,
To be with him, if not in heaven, in hell.

Enter Nero.

Is she gone ?

Nero. Aye, gone, gone for ever,—my soul !

Sab. Had she any forewarning of her fate,
Or did she part off with an easy smile ?

Nero. I saw some restlessness about her face,
But like a medicine curing a disease,
My simulating tongue soothed it at once.
Poppæa, what have I done ?

Sab. That is not Nero.

It is some coward working up his conscience.

Nero. Thou art right, I must not play the
coward,

Nor must I talk of conscience any more.

For what is conscience but a fool's fond dream,

A woman's superstition, a child's fear ?

There is so much good to do in this world,

But I have left it out and chosen evil.

The Tragedy of Nero 77

I have done it and must abide it now.

But O, yet I wish I had not done it.

Sab. Be not so overpowered by your soul,
Nor rub your heavy-injured conscience thus,
As children after fall hug th' wounded part.
But find out means to cure the smarting wound,
And to heal the diseased part of your soul.

Nero. What means, what cure? O gods, that
there were some!

Sab. What, is there none? Why, sleep is the
best cure.

Nero. Get thee alone, for I can sleep no more.

Sab. Not even in mine arms?

Nero. Ah! there I will.

I feel the arms of hell around my neck.

Sab. O Nero!

Nero. O Poppæa!

Sab. Come to bed.

Nero. If not to sleep, to toss about in hell.

[*Exit both.*]

SCENE 4.—*Baie. A Room in Agrippina's villa.*

*Agrippina lying on a couch, some of her women
standing by.*

1st Woman. Verily, nothing could have saved
her but the providential grace.

2nd Woman. And she escaped but with a wound
on her beautiful arm. The gods, however, were

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not so propitious to Creperius and Acceronia who, they say, perished instantly.

1st Woman. And so would the empress have, but she clung to the side of her chamber till she was gently dropped into the sea. They say she swam with manly courage till she fell in with a boat that, taking her up and passing through the Lucrine lake, landed her hither.

2nd Woman. She wakes.

Agri. (*waking*). Villain! Villain! Villain! (*Looking round*) What do you here, girls, what hour is it?

1st Woman. So please your grace, it is upon the hour of two.

Agri. Then get you to bed and rest yourselves, My wound hath ceased to pain me. Where is Agerinus?

1st Woman. Madam! here he comes.

Enter Agerinus.

Agri. Go now, and before you retire, keep ready another application for my wound.

[*Exit women.*]

Ager. How feels your good grace?

Agri. Well, Agerinus!

Was ever man more monstrous on earth?

Was ever human man so like a beast?

So foul, so bloody and unnatural?

O gods! what a monster I have borne me!

The Tragedy of Nero 79

Ager. But, by your pardon, is your grace assured
It was a plot against your life?

Agri. Assured?
Would I not know an accident from plot?
While by the helm was standing Creperius,
And Acceronia, lying at my feet,
Was offering her prayers to the gods
That our new bond may never break again,
All on a sudden such a sound was heard
As roaring seas or thunders never made,
And the roof of that bloody vessel burst,
And down it tumbled with a deafening crack.
Creperius, ere she was aware, was crushed
And fell in pieces like a rock-wrecked boat.
Amongst those rowers vast confusion fell,
Who, being innocent, upset and impeached
The movements of the murderous of their kind,
Who had been hired for this bloody deed,
And thus confusion on confusion heaped.
We two were gently in the waters dropped,
But scarce the billows we were breasting now,
When Acceronia, all aghast and mad,
Full face to face with such a fearful death,
Cried out, nay, almost yelled, "Save me! Save me!
I am Agrippina, the emperor's mother!"
Which hearing, and mistaking her for me,
With poles and oars and other implements,
Blow after blow they struck her on the head,
Till she before mine eyes sank down a corpse.

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O gods ! what an unhuman sight it was !
Had I not kept my mind and peace with me,
For this one wound I would have shared her fate.
My own fair fortune and the grace of gods
Have saved me from a death so terrible.

Ager. Aye, that and that alone hath saved your
life ;

And the kind gods be praised for their sweet care
And dear respect upon your royal head.
It leaves no doubt your life was aimed upon.

Agri. As if to witness to the monstrous crime,
The gods had given us a starry night,
Calm winds and waters and propitious gales.

Ager. Belike your grace did never smack of it
Before you stepped into the fateful ship !

Agri. In sooth, I was forewarned of treachery,
And I myself was apprehensive too.
But Nero's words and looks belied it all,
And put a cheerful aspect on the things.
Why, at the table he withdrew himself,
And seated me upon the emperor's chair.
Then arm in arm he led me to the shore,
Where, ere we parted with hopes to meet again,
Embraces on embraces, smiles on smiles,
And kisses on fond kisses he bestowed,
With words that fell like a spell on my ears,
And made my sad heart leap for very joy.
O murder ! what a veil thou couldst put on !

Ager. You stand in such an open peril, madam,

The Tragedy of Nero 81

That it were folly to evade the proof.
An outrage so unnatural must be,
That you may live in peace, nipped in the bud.
The fittest is to let the Senate know,
And stir the people also in your cause.
Your slaves and all your freedmen will be yours.

Agri. Nay, let him kill me, only let him reign.
The fittest is not what thou dost propose,
But to ignore his treachery to see.
Thou shalt appear before him, and declare
That by the blessings of the blessed gods
I have escaped a deadly accident,
And what is stranger, only with a wound ;
That need there is none he should be alarmed,
Nor should he trouble himself, as I am well,
To undertake a visit at my place.

Ager. Will not your grace think better of it yet ?

Agri. This is the best that I have thought and
planned.

Depart at once without a moment's loss,
And by the break of dawn thou shalt be there.
Nay, think not on the oddness of the hour ;
The nature of the message excuses it,
Which he is apt to hear without delay.

[*Exit Agerinus.*]

O gods ! O gods ! O gods !
I curse my womb that bore me such a monster.
O Nero ! where is all thy nature gone ?
That thou hast turned so brutish and unnatural,

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Aye, turned 'gainst the very name thou bear'st?
O villain, villain, villain!
Dost thou not dread the torturous Nemesis,
That thou wouldst dip thy hand in thy mother's
blood?

How much have I done for a monster's sake?
How have I damned myself for him?—O gods!
If there be pity in your heavens, pity me,
And wash away the stigmas on my soul!
Fain would I summon thee, O dreadful Até,
But that my heart forbids my tongue the word.
'Though lost, I will retain my nature yet.
Have pity on me now, immortal gods!
Spare me such fate and spare him such damnation,
And let a suffering woman die in peace! [*Exit.*]

SCENE 5.—*A Room in the Palace.*

Enter Nero.

Nero. What hour is it? The day is yet not
broken,
For at the chamber-window looking out
I did not see the morning in the skies.
O sleep! scarce did I sink in thy oblivion,
When thou didst wake me up in hell again!
Thou art disgusted now to dwell with me.
What ghastly sights have I beheld to-night!
What deep and piteous groans mine ears have
heard!

The Tragedy of Nero 83

Enter Sabina.

Well, Poppæa, why dost thou stir forth so early?

Sab. Because I could not sleep with empty arms.
What means this sudden stealing from your bed?

Nero. That there is no more sleep for Nero now.
O! could I hold the mirror up to thee
Of those strange fantasies I saw to-night,
That rose up as from some infernal den,
Inhabited by wild and frantic beings,
Thou couldst not hold thy breath.

Sab. Hush, hush, dear Nero,
Look, here comes your boy; look your manly self.

Enter Epaphroditus.

Nero. What dost thou want?

Epa. To know if two men who wait without
Are apt to be admitted at this hour.

Nero. What hour is it, and what are those two
men?

Epa. It is the earliest hour before the dawn.
One of them is a captain of the fleet,
The other a centurion. Sir, they say
They bear a message that imports your grace.

Nero. It is about my mother, Poppæa. Run,
sirrah, run, and bid them fly hither.

[Exit Epaphroditus.]

It is about her. Get thee in thy chamber.

Sab. Let me stay by.

Nero. What, wilt thou face those men?

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Sab. I have my gown on and am fit to be seen.

Nero. Not that, not that ; but how——

Sab. Soft you, they come.

Enter Hercules and Oloaritus.

Nero. I know you both, Hercules and Oloaritus.

Come closer yet. [*They go nearer.*]

Now speak at once what message 'tis you bring
That seems to bear so great an emphasis.

Her. We both are hither sent by Anicetus,
Who hath bid us deliver to your grace,
That with a single wound upon her arm
Your mother hath escaped the wreck.

Nero. What, villain !

Dost thou come to mock me, and thou, too, villain ?

Olo. Not to mock you ; to bring your grace the
news

That will be running soon from mouth to mouth.

Nero. O thou Anicetus ? thou cursèd fellow !

My mother lives. Poppæa ! my mother lives !

She will kill me, O gods, she will kill me !

Who will protect me ? Where is Anicetus ?

Fellows, where are your weapons ? Have them
about !

Speak, what shall I do ? My life, O my life !

Sab. Send for Burrhus and Seneca at once.

Nero. Fly, fellows, fly, and give them wings to
fly hither. If from over-feasting they still cling to
their sheets, pull down their pillows, pluck them by

The Tragedy of Nero 85

their beards, kick them, do what you can, but bid them fly to me. Go, run, fly, fly.

[*Exit Hercules and Oloaritus.*]

Poppæa ! arm thyself, arm all my slaves,
And summon all my soldiers at the gate.
She comes, O she comes, crying for revenge !
Hold me ! protect me ! My life, O my life !

Sab. I never knew you were made of so poor stuff.

Why, Nero, can you not shame cowardice ?

Nero. Not while her arms are lifted on my head.
Where is Anicetus ? Why comes he not ?
Hath he turned traitor ? My life, O my life !

Sab. You are a man, call up the man in you.
Let Seneca and Burrhus know it all,
And see if aught can they devise for you.
I will look for Anicetus the while,
And bid him bring this business to an end.

[*Exit Sabina.*]

Nero. The end ! when will it come ? when will it come ?

O what a coward it doth make of me !
Boy, slave, come, hither ! where art thou ?

Enter Epaphroditus.

Epa. Here, my lord !

Nero. Where is thy mother ?

Epa. With her forefathers, sir !

Nero. What is she doing there ?

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Epa. How can I tell?

Nero. Didst thou love her?

Epa. More than I loved myself,
And even in her grave I love her still.

Nero. Thou liest, thou never lovedst thy mother,
slave?

Epa. There lived no man that did not love his
mother.

Nero. What didst thou say, villain? Wouldst
thou sting me?

Who set thee up against me?

Epa. What means my liege?

Nero. Begone! or I will kill thee.

[*Exit Epaphroditus.*]

Enter Anicetus.

Ah! Anicetus!

Thou hast betrayed me, man! thou has undone me.

Ani. Betrayed your grace! how?

Nero. My mother lives.

Ani. Ah!

By gods that is a miracle indeed!

I wonder how your mother could escape,

When all on board have perished in the wreck?

Nero. It is the gods, it is the gods!

What shall I do? She will pursue me here.

Anicetus, what means of safety now?

Ani. Let me have some of the pretorian guards,
And with a dagger I will finish it.

The Tragedy of Nero 87

Nero. Thou wilt, thou wilt? O, what a man
thou art!

Thy meaning is apparent in thy looks.

Ani. Doth then my visage bare my bloody
purpose?

Nero. It doth, but even to the shrewdest eye
Thy innermost heart would betray itself
No more than it would to a child new-born,
Unless the mind with thine did correspond.
My corresponding mind, and not mine eye,
Doth in thy face peruse thy secret heart.
But where tarry they, though they are bid at once?

Ani. Whom doth your grace mean?

Nero. Burrhus and Seneca.
I sent your men for them.

Ani. Here they appear.

Enter Seneca and Burrhus.

Nero. Are the streets quiet, or are they astir?

Sen. The rumour runs your mother hath
escaped

A terrible wreck in the Gulf of Baia,
And several people at this early hour
Run to the shore to learn the truth thereof.

Nero. I am undone, Seneca; I am undone!
Save me, save me! take my crown but save me!
The shipwreck was my plot against her life,
Given to the charge of Anicetus.
But being safe, and smelling my intent,

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She will inflame the soldiers, arm her slaves,
Run to the Senate crying for revenge.

O Seneca ! O Burrhus ! save me now !

Your minds together must devise, invent,
How I at once must rid myself of her.

Nay, stand not staring at each other thus !

My life, my life ! O let my mother die !

Sen. Your mother ? O be not so unnatural !

Nero. O Burrhus ! speak for me to Seneca !

Bur. Think of the gods, Nero ! Think of the
gods !

Let them not shudder at this damning deed.

Sen. Upon my knees I beg of you forbear.

Forbear, O Nero ! 'Tis a heinous deed.

It never had a precedent in Rome.

Think of the curses of the Nemesis !

Think of your name and of your country's name !

What will they say who hence will talk of you ?

O such a deed will be damned, damned for ever !

From mouth to mouth and down from page to page

It will stand out to all the after times,

And with your name our names will be condemned.

O Nero ! pupil ! emperor ! forbear !

Bur. Forbear, forbear ! your Burrhus pleads to
you.

O let not heavens erase your name for ever !

Nero. My friends desert me, gods, my friends
desert me !

Give me a dagger and I will end myself.

The Tragedy of Nero 89

Think on my life, dear friends, think on my life !
She will invoke the vengeful Até now,
And will not hold till I am dashed to pieces.
My life ! my life ! Look, thus I kiss your robes !

Sen. The naked crisis stands before us now
That one of them must perish by the other.
Speak, Burrhus, speak ! I am beside myself
With terror and confusion.

Nero. O dear Burrhus !

Bur. The guards will not obey such a command,
As they consider it profane to touch
The bloods of Cæsar and Germanicus.
So let Anicetus perform the task
And end now what ere long he hath begun.
O gods ! I fear your vengeance !

Nero. Anicetus, then wilt thou keep thy word ?

Ani. I will, no matter at what sacrifice.

Nero. Now I am crowned indeed and by a
freedman !

Enter Epaphroditus.

Epa. So please your grace there waits a messenger
From your great royal mother.

Nero. Pray you go
And hear the message first ; and if you find
It is meet for mine ears, let me hear it.

[Exit Seneca, Burrhus, and Epaphroditus.]

Nero. How deeply thou art buried in thyself !

90 The Tragedy of Nero

Some new device as I can well divine.

Ani. Shall I reveal it to your grace?

Nero. Quick, quick!

Ani. While you receive the message from his lips,

I will throw down this dagger at his feet.

That will look like an aim upon your life

Which to your mother you may well impute,

And when 'tis done it will be safely said

That from shame and fear she foredid herself.

Nero. Capital, fellow, capital! thou art a genius!

Enter Seneca, Burrhus, and Agerinus.

Sen. Your grace be pleased to hear your mother's message.

Nero. What message dost thou bring me from her grace?

Ager. I am sent to inform your majesty
That by the blessings of the gracious gods
Her grace hath been saved from a fatal wreck,
But with a wound upon her upper arm,
And that my liege, as nothing is amiss,
Need not be anxious for a visit.

[*Anicetus throws down a dagger.*

Nero. What's that?

A dagger! Burrhus, Seneca, look you!

This is the message which my mother sends.

Ager. I never hid a dagger in my bosom.

Nero. Whence this, thou murderer, whence this?

The Tragedy of Nero 91

Ager. It is, as I can see, some strategy.
I came but with a message to your grace.

Nero. A message not for mine ears, but my heart.

O villain! thou vulgar hired murderer!

Ah! do you see it now?

Bur. and Sen.

It is too plain.

Nero. Go take away the villain and chain him fast,

And by to-morrow let his head be off.

Ager. Agrippina! your hour is come at last!
An unnatural monster hungers for your blood!
(*aside*).

[*Exit Burrhus and Seneca with Agerinus.*]

Nero. Poor fellow! there, look how he drops his head!

To-morrow morning and it will run blood.

By Jupiter thou didst it with a grace

That made my dry mouth water as from thirst.

Anicetus! art thou sure of thyself?

Ani. Your grace needs no assurance any more.

Both my men are firm and sufficient,

And when I am at their head, it is certain.

Nero. I have a mind to follow you disguised,

That when 'tis done I may shed tears at least.

How shall I thank thee, brave Anicetus?

I did but wear my title in the name,

But now my crown and empire are confirmed.

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Thank thee, brave giver! Come, give me thy hand!

[*Exit Nero arm in arm with Anicetus.*]

SCENE 6.—*A Room in Seneca's House.*

Enter Seneca and Burrhus.

Sen. O Burrhus! the high gods we have offended,

And acted as we have against our soul
And conscience, we have died before our
deaths.

I see the gods bent on our guilty heads
With fiery wrath.

Bur. That we have wronged ourselves
And therein wronged the gods stands bare to us.
Still, for our part, my noble Seneca,
What private gain or profit have we sought
By our consent, against our will, to it?
We did it for the safety of young Nero
And for the general peace.

Sen. Aye, even so.
That Nero stands in danger is apparent,
Proved by the dagger of Agerinus.
What bloody issues curse the Rome of gods!
When son and mother are at variance drawn,
Then what unholy bloodshed there must be!
True, Burrhus, true that we have kept him safe,

The Tragedy of Nero 93

But by what means?—Ah! there's the conscience'
sting!

Consent in murder is the deed itself,
Though your own hands may be exempt from it,
And on your side there be much good defence.

Bur. By your just argument I am converted,
And as much as I justified myself
As much, nay in a vaster measure yet,
I blame, I curse, and even condemn, myself.
O Seneca! the gods and you do know
That all the power upon the guards conferred
Not by a single misdeed I've abused.
For in my very soul I hold it true
If might and justice went not hand in hand,
The world would have ere-long come to an end.
O that I could efface but this one spot!
Surely to give us proof of our offence,
The gods will spare no vengeance on our heads.

Sen. And they be praised, if Nero pauses here.
I fear he might cast off the man in him,
And turn his heart as black as rusted iron;
Because such is the nature of this deed
That hearts as soft as milk it soon would make
As hard as stones, and would unsoul the man.

Bur. Would I were dead long, long before that
time!

O how can I bare my face to the world
Who faced such opposition for his sake?
But soft, here comes your wife.—I will go kneel

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And weep and supplicate the high Immortals,
For tears and prayers reconcile the gods.

Sen. And may your prayers be accepted all.

[*Exit Burrhus.*]

Enter Pullina.

Pul. My lord! what men were those that in the
morn

So hotly knocked and knocked upon your door?

Sen. The emperor's messengers.

Pul. And by your leave

Why were you called for at that early hour,
Surprised and snatched out of your natural rest?

Sen. Spare me that question, my dear Pullina.

Pul. Were I by my condition not forbid,
I would insist on it. Yet let me speak.
I have my apprehensions that this man,
This emperor so faithfully you serve
Will bring you trouble in your last few days,
And will disturb your last peace with the gods,
For of late he is not reported well.

Sen. The diamond will not lose its higher nature,
Though in a frequent contact it might come
With other metals of a baser sort.

A butcher's neighbour may not be himself
A butcher; nor who walks forth in the night,
Though having knowledge that he risks his name,
With murderers, must needs belong to them.
So I, though I may serve a butcherous king,
Must not be also counted of his kind.

The Tragedy of Nero 95

If he is of the colour given him,
There are no tortures but the Nemesis
Upon him will inflict.—Leave me in peace ;
I'm not well and I know not what I say.

Pul. Forgive me, but O, give me leave to speak !
You look so changed, and in your wrinkled brows
And in your fallen visage I behold
An injured conscience.—Nay, nay, frown not so !
Forgive me, my lord ! Look, upon my knees
I do implore you to discharge yourself
Of all your duties and your offices.
You have fulfilled the mission of your life,
And at your time you need more rest than work.

Sen. Rise, rise ! give me thy hand and lead me
in
To prayers, for I am sick in the soul.
O that thy Seneca were in his grave !

Pul. Then Pullina would long to hasten there.
My lord ! my lord ! let me cheer up your drooping
heart ! [*He leans upon her arm. Exit both.*]

SCENE 7.—*Baie. A Room in Agrippina's Villa.*

Agrippina seated, a woman standing by.

Agri. Agerinus is not as yet returned.
I fear me his detainment bodes some ill.

Woman. Delays may be or may not be portents,
And unexpected things oft hap for good.

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Agerinus may yet return to you
With richer gifts than your good grace dreams of.

Agri. But fated and conditioned as I am
Portentous his delay appears to me,
And full of omens that make me full of fear.

Woman. What means your grace by your fate
and condition?

Agri. Thou rather shouldst rejoice in ignorance
Than in the knowledge of my ominous words,
For if thou learnst the sense of what I say
Thou wouldst as soon wish to unlearn it again,
So terrible it is. But tell me, girl,
Hast thou a son?

Woman. So please your grace but one.

Agri. And as thou hast, list to my counsel then.
Be not over-ambitious for thy son,
Nor crave to see him shine in any sphere
But that which the gods have to him assigned.
Over-loving mothers are apt to be blind,
And, being so, do things against their soul,
Craving to see their sons equal with the gods.
This is the common failing of all mothers.
Nor seldom doth it happen that our sons,
The spark of gratitude all dead in them,
Turn savage beasts, and do unnatural things.

Enter several women in fright.

Women. Fly, madam, fly; the soldiers burst the
gate.

The Tragedy of Nero 97

And in their looks is nought but butchery.

Agri. What shall I do? O gods, where shall I fly?
[*Exit women.*]

Woman. I hear their steps; I will fly for my life.

Agri. You too desert me?

[*The woman runs away.*]

Enter Anicetus, Hercules and Oloaritus. Some soldiers guard the door.

This is a surprise.

If you come with inquiries after me,
With my thanks to your emperor return,
And say I am well.

Ani. Soon it will be well;

But let me praise you for your courage first.

Agri. What do you mean?

Ani. That which you understand.

Agri. But I do not.

Ani. (showing the dagger). Then this will speak for me.

Agri. No, I will not believe it of my son.

He hath no hand in such a monstrous deed,
And he would not command his mother's blood.

Ani. Tell her our mission, friends.

Her. and Olo. So please your grace

We come upon his order to take your life.

Agri. But you will not do it, no, you will not!

Ani. Come, come, my empress! lay your bosom bare,

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And let my hate and hunger have their fill.

Agri. Thou fiend! O thou villainous murderer!
Come, lay thy hands upon a helpless woman
And shame the gods by thy base cowardice.

[Anicetus stabs her.]

Strike, strike the womb that gave the world a
monster.

*[They stab her severally and she falls
on the couch.]*

O Nero! thou art damned, damned, damned for
ever!

[Dies.]

Ani. Farewell, Agrippina! I am avenged.
Now soldiers, go and fall to spoils at once,
And do what you will with the women-slaves.

[Exit soldiers.]

Her. Shall we remove the body?

Ani. Let it lie there,

The son will have a mourning on his mother.

Enter Nero disguised.

Nero. Villains! have you done it?

Ani. Look there, my liege!

Nero. Go villains, go, wash off the bloody spot,
And to the palace come for your reward.

[Exit Anicetus, Hercules and Oloaritus.]

O mother! O my mother!

What a rare piece of earth have I destroyed!

I cannot look upon your beauty yet,
Embellished with all graces so divine,

The Tragedy of Nero 99

And not think that they must be fiends who rent
Such an adorable piece of mortal flesh,
More fair and beautiful than dreams of poets,
Or painters' fancy ever imaged forth.
A monster hath wrought havoc on your beauty.
Look! thus I wash my hands in your dear blood,
That sleeping, and awake, I may smell it.
I am damned, I am damned beyond redemption.
This shall be hence recorded in our tongue,
And all the foreign accents copy it.
When any wants a fiend to his purpose,
Then will he conjure with the name of Nero,
Passing o'er all the names in hell—O mother!
Let me hold you in my arms and kiss you!

[*Exit.*

ACT IV.

SCENE I.—*Rome. An Orchard in the Palace.*

Enter Vantelius and Volumnius.

Vol. I doubt not that your painting was approved.

Van. Approved! By Jupiter the man was mad.
He looked and looked at it, and turned it round;
Then stared at me apparently amazed,
And then, as if for want of words, he said
That Nature could not be a better artist.

100 The Tragedy of Nero

Vol. So, when he heard my song, he stood
entranced,
And then himself burst forth in strains and sounds,
But so crude and without all harmony
That 'twas a trial to restrain myself.

Van. But why should we be bidden in the
orchard?

Vol. Perhaps he thought the palace was too dull
To talk romance, and love, and poetry.
There, look, he comes ; and Lucan follows him,
It seems he presses some rejected suit.

Van. In sooth he looks so sad.

Vol. He speaks again.
He prays, he kneels, but is repulsed with frowns.

Van. It bodes not well for us.

Vol. Hush ! let us see.

Enter Nero.

Nero. Well, what would you, sir?—and, sir,
what would you?
Aye, I remember you were called forth hither.
But soft, what for? My mind is so inwrapped
That I cannot recall it. [*Walks up and down.*]

Van. I fear me we are doomed like Lucan.

Vol. Aye.

Nero. There it is !
Which of you is the captain of the fleet?

Vol. So please your grace I am Volumnius,
Whose music drew praise from your royal lips,

~~~~~



## The Tragedy of Nero 101

And was so royally rewarded too.

*Nero.* And who are you?

*Van.* Vantelius, my liege!

Whose art, if I may quote your majesty,

Was equal to the faultless art of nature.

*Nero.* I know I have commended both of you,

And I must yet require you.

*Van. and Vol.* At your service.

*Nero.* Your crouchings would have shamed a courtier.

Now rise and hasten to the tasks I set.

Upon thy canvas trace my mother's form

From the original, but with this change,

That she must hold a dagger in her hand,

Half plunged in her bosom ;—and thou, musician,

My mother's story in a verse relate,

How, to hide her shame, she killed herself,

And how her son bewailed, though sinned against,

And tune it to such a pathetic strain

That eyes unused to weep may drop down tears.

Do it and I will treble your rewards.

*Van.* Your grace shall have the picture very soon.

Sir! pardon me for want of further speech,

For I am overcome by gratitude.

*Vol.* The story will I set to such a tune

That it shall be rehearsed from street to street.

My noble liege! you are so well adored

For all those virtues which a prince should have,

That all your Rome points out, "Here is a king."

## 102 The Tragedy of Nero

*Nero.* I love not flattery, still I am flattered.  
Now go about your tasks and do them well.

[*Exit Vantelius and Volumnius.*]

*Enter Sabina.*

*Sab.* What men were those?

*Nero.* Two beggars like thyself.

*Sab.* I a beggar?

*Nero.* Dost thou not beg my love?

*Sab.* Ah! there I beg indeed; I do, my  
sweet!

And though I have proportionate to all  
I want, yet is my appetite not quenched,  
So endless and eternal is my love.

*Nero.* Keep it, Poppæa, keep it to the end.

*Sab.* And what about Octavia now?

*Nero.* Why, what?

*Sab.* That question you must answer.

*Nero.* Let her live.

*Sab.* Aye, to kill my dear Nero.

*Nero.* Kill me? how?

*Sab.* How long will she endure her banishment?  
How long will she preserve, placed as she is,  
The virtues which it was her wont to brag?  
That she may rise with Otho who can tell?

*Nero.* Kill her, kill her! let me be rid of  
her.

*Sab.* Then free yourself from Seneca and  
Burrhus.

## The Tragedy of Nero 103

*Nero.* Where wilt thou stop, fair demon? where wilt thou stop?

Why wouldst thou have me kill my faithful friends?

*Sab.* Not kill them quite, but then throw off their yoke.

*Nero.* That thou mayest reign supreme?

*Sab.* O Nero, Nero!

*Nero.* Come, come; I care not if thou reign or I,

What matters it if it be I or thou?

It were as well as one or both together;

We shall reign in hell as we do on earth—

Here come the villains;—nay, fly not away!

Thou hast a face can face a world of villains.

*Enter Anicetus, Hercules, and Oloaritus.*

*Sab.* Instruct them well about Octavia first.

*Nero.* Anicetus, despatch Octavia now.

Art thou sure of thy men?

*Ani.* Your grace knows it.

*Nero.* Wouldst thou fear anything to serve thy king?

*Her.* Not even life.

*Nero.* And thou?

*Olo.* Nothing in the world.

*Nero.* Where is their gold?

[*Sabina gives him a bag.*

Here give th' devils their dues.

[*He gives it to Anicetus.*

## 104 The Tragedy of Nero

*Enter Agrippina's Ghost.*

The ghost! the ghost! it is my mother's ghost!  
Save me, or it will swallow me alive!  
O villains! do not stare and start and tremble,  
Come near, stand round, or I will murder you.

*Sab.* O! I am sick to fainting.

*[Exit Sabina, followed by Anicetus, Hercules,  
and Oloaritus in fright.]*

*Nero.* Out of my sight, thou hell, out of my  
sight!

Why dost thou stare at me? what, kneel to thee?  
No! standing thou wilt take me by surprise,  
And stab me as those villains stabbed thy heart;  
Yes, yes, I stabbed thee, having bidden them—  
Go, go, go! or I will stab thee again;  
Go, go, thou horrid vision, go!—O! O!

*[Falls fainting.]*

SCENE 2.—*Before the Palace.*

*Enter Seneca and Lucan.*

*Luc.* Upon my soul, dear brother Seneca,  
I know not how I have offended him,  
Or wherein have incurred his sudden hate  
That he forbids me, on the pain of death,  
To read my verses any more, unless  
'Twere more his malice than my own demerit.

## The Tragedy of Nero 105

*Sen.* Your merit, Lucan, hath been well approved

Beyond the malice of all envious mouths,  
And for what reason is your verse proscribed  
I neither can divine nor understand.

*Luc.* Despite his frightful frowns, I knelt, I prayed,

But sooner had I moved the immovable rock.

O Seneca ! this Nero takes my life

When he doth take away its dearest joy !

I pray you, brother, stand my advocate ;

Your years and hairs will better speak for me.

*Sen.* Between us, Lucan, I've a mind to resign,

And not against my will, my services ;

For I am grown so weary of my charge

That I can bear it no more on my back ;

To this intent I call upon him now,

And to apprise him of the death of Burrhus,

And then, be sure, you will be pleaded for.

*Luc.* May the gods crown your effort with success !

And, brother, how far he overleaps his power—

He massacres the Christian flock, as if

They were mere game for wanton butchery ;

Nor spares the noblest of our Roman blood,

And for no other reason, as I think,

Than that he dreads their power they increase,

And might in time become full dangerous ;

This bloody course which he is running now

## 106 The Tragedy of Nero

Must needs be checked and stopped before it goes  
Beyond the hard endurance of the soul :  
How long will Rome abide such tyranny ?  
How long will Rome permit such fearful blood-  
shed ?

The Romans are not used to tyrants' sway ;  
Things have I heard which are out of the womb,  
And, nourished once, they will be soon afoot.  
Bid him withhold his hand, while there is time,  
And press on him the danger that he runs.

*Sen.* Woe worth the day when Nero got the  
crown !

O Lucan ! to what a pass the things have come !  
Grant, ye immortals ! that my Rome may prosper,  
And live out of the teeth of tyranny !  
Come, Lucan, come ! I am so sick at heart !  
O why was I not born in other times ? [*Exit both.*

### SCENE 3.—*A Room in the Palace.*

*Enter Nero and Sabina.*

*Nero.* Begone ! why dost thou follow me about ?

*Sab.* Not to keep mine eyes off you.

*Nero.* What saidst thou ?

*Sab.* You cast your eyes on other women now,  
And I know what baits you'll throw for them.

*Nero.* For thy peace, Poppæa, hide thee from my  
sight,

## The Tragedy of Nero 107

And leave thy Nero's doings to themselves.

Now all the monster wells up in my heart,

And if it bursts, it will crush thee anon.

*Sab.* I have a right to follow you, and I will.

*Nero.* Thou brute! wilt thou front me so?

*Sab.* Aye, I will!

*Nero.* I will kill thee.

*Sab.* Let me see how you will.

*Nero.* Avaunt! tempt me no more, or I will burst.

The lion's roaring is but like a whisper,

When Nero roars.

*Sab.* I like to hear you roar.

*Nero.* Begone! begone! or I will murder thee.

*Sab.* Then am I no more beautiful in your eyes?

Doth not my beauty melt you any more?

Am I no more your Venus?

*Nero.* Get thee gone!

*Sab.* Turn round to see the beauty you adore,  
And it will soften you. Turn round, sweet Nero!  
The charms of nature have not faded yet.

*Nero.* Aye, nature did on thee bestow this form  
To lure and captivate the gazing eye.

But she did not forget to stamp thy brow

To give thereby a warning to the world,

"Avoid the serpent in the human garb!"

Though I love thee, I feel thy venomous fangs

In th' circling of thy arms around my neck.

I tell thee stay not any longer here,

## 108 The Tragedy of Nero

For thou hast thrown my nature to the beasts  
And made a bloody monster of a man.

*Sab.* And monster that thou art, a monster die,  
O villain! there will be no grave for thee,  
But thy bones be thrown to the carrion kites,  
And for flowers they will spit upon thy tomb.  
Poppæa's curses fall on Nero's head!

*Nero.* Thou seven-times damned devil! I will  
teach

Thee how to hold thy tongue!

*[He holds her by the throat and pushes  
her out.]*

Ay, now thou weepst,  
And feign'st to fall! Go, fiend, faint and die!

*Enter Seneca.*

*Sen.* My lord!

*Nero.* What do you want?

*Sen.* To tell your grace  
That gentle Burrhus last night passed away.

*Nero.* Well, let him pass where he lists.

*Sen.* He is dead.

*Nero.* What, Burrhus dead? O, what a blow is  
there!

I liked him much, in sooth, I loved him well;

He was as blunt as he was good and honest.

—What more?

*Sen.* If you would live, you must beware.

*Nero.* What do you mean?



## The Tragedy of Nero 109

*Sen.* Give me free leave to speak.  
Your persecution of the noble Rome  
Without a cause or any approved offence,  
And for myself I see that there is none,  
Might lead them to avenge their grievous wrongs.

*Nero.* If that be all, then you have done.

*Sen.* Nero!  
I do implore you take it not so lightly.  
It may be pregnant with a thousand things  
Which, being born, will be the cause of mischief.

*Nero.* I reckon it not; what more have you to say?

*Sen.* The Christians whom you causelessly destroy  
Might with their spirits stir their brethren,  
Who might inflame the nobles you have wronged  
And make our Rome a scene of piteous bloodshed.

*Nero.* Who was this Christ?

*Sen.* The Son of God, they say.  
Before the coming of this Child divine  
—That is the title which His birth doth bear—  
A John, a prophet styled and revered,  
Awoke the world with his great prophecy.  
The day may yet be far, but it will come,  
When Romans will be Christians, and rejoice.

*Nero.* I note in this your Christian inclination.  
Why should you make of Christ a darling theme,  
And give away the mighty Roman world,  
That could stand by itself, to His conversion?  
Say 'tis my humour to destroy this sect;  
Some of our actions have no thought in them.

## 110 The Tragedy of Nero

*Sen.* Are human beings meant to be the preys  
Of wanton humour?

*Nero.* No more of it :—what more ?

*Sen.* That Lucan be allowed, as he was wont,  
To read his verses to the mob.

*Nero.* Seneca !  
If all hell were here ranked before my face,  
I never would revoke what I have done.

*Sen.* Then there is left no more for me to say.  
From this day I resign my heavy charge,  
Wishing to live my remnant days in peace.

*Nero.* I will not interfere with your desire.

*Sen.* Nero, bear in mind all that I have said.

*Nero.* Have mind upon the truth, old Seneca,  
I am your emperor, no more your pupil.

[*Exit Nero.*]

*Sen.* Old Seneca ! no more good Seneca !  
O vanity, vanity, vanity !  
Thou evil flatterer ! in thee how much  
An increase of himself thy minion finds !  
The mind that else would stoop and own its elders  
By thee doth own itself the best and eldest.  
Thou makest a lion of a creeping mouse,  
And of the man more fit to be a slave  
Thou makest a mighty god like Jupiter.  
Thou teachest nothing but self-flattery,  
And turn'st the nobler instincts of the soul  
To naught but self and base ingratitude.  
Great gods ! were you vain of your power divine,

## The Tragedy of Nero 111

How would you suffer man, the little man,  
With power to bestride the human world?  
O world! O vain, vain world!

*Re-enter Nero.*

*Nero.* Begone! old Seneca, begone at once,  
Or I will murder you! Poppæa is dead.  
I have killed her:—O what a brutal kick!  
It was upon your coming in this room  
That being vexed I kicked her off from me!  
But O! I did not know it would end thus.  
I am as glad as I am grieved for her.  
By killing her I have plucked down a rose  
Whose amorous fragrance had my heart en-  
sweetened;  
And I have as well killed a poisonous viper,  
Full of a thousand fangs within her bosom.  
Begone at once and leave me with Antonia.

*[Exit Seneca.]*

*Enter Antonia.*

Come, come! sweet lovely cherub, come to me!  
Antonia, will you be my empress now?

*Ant.* I would be more proud of the meanest man  
That lives than ever would I be of you.

*Nero.* What reasons can you urge against my love?

*Ant.* Who killed my father Claudius, tell me  
that?

Who killed the innocent Britannicus?

## 112 The Tragedy of Nero

Who killed foul Agrippina (though it is said,  
That on herself she laid her violent hands),  
A deed unnatural that made nature shudder ?  
Who killed Octavia, truest of all wives ?  
First answer me these questions, if you dare,  
And ask me then why I deny your love.

*Nero.* What villain could have poisoned your  
young ears ?

Antonia, all these tales are false as hell,  
And even if they were as true as heaven,  
You could redeem me by your love, Antonia !  
Let me kiss you ; for a kiss on your lips  
Fain would I undergo a thousand hells,  
But by a kiss to be redeemed at last.

*Ant.* Go, lay your lips on like-polluted lips !  
Pollution to pollution well might wed.  
I will not bind myself to such a fiend  
To be choked by his hell-emitting breath,  
And be myself as foul and as defiled.

*Nero.* Do you forget the presence you are in ?  
Do you forget I am the emperor ?

*Ant.* Fools and flatterers call you by that name.  
A raven, in a peacock's plumage clothed,  
Retains its blackness and is still a raven.  
I cannot bear to stand before a monster.

[*Exit Antonia.*]

*Nero.* Go, go, and as thou goest, say thy last  
prayers !  
Anicetus !

## The Tragedy of Nero 113

*Enter Anicetus.*

How responsive friends are?  
Despatch Antonia and Statilia's husband.  
I want Statilia.

*Ani.* You shall have her, my liege,  
[*Exit Anicetus.*]

*Nero.* I can conceive a hell, and I myself,  
Its sole inhabitant, sole emperor.  
Nay, nay, ten thousand hells would not hold me.

*Enter Agrippina's Ghost.*

Thou horrid vision, why dost thou haunt me?  
O stare not at me with thy hollow eyes!  
Speak, thou illusion! speak, no matter what!  
Thy silence is more terrible than death;  
It cuts my flesh and freezes up my blood,  
As frost congeals the waters of the stream.  
Away, away! I cannot look at thee. [*Exit Ghost.*]  
It is gone, and I may take heart again. [*Exit Nero.*]

SCENE 4.—*A Room in Piso's house.*

*Enter Piso, Lucan, Milichus, Natalis, and three nobles.*

*Piso.* Speak then and every one of us speak free.

*Luc.* Give them your mind and make them  
swear to keep it.

## 114 The Tragedy of Nero

*Piso.* Before the nature of our bond is known,  
If there be one among us here who would,  
Against the voice and sufferance of his soul,  
Not be a freeman, but remain a slave,  
Then let him know this is no place for him,  
But he had better be amongst the bondmen.

*Luc.* There is not one who bears so base a  
mind,  
Or he would not be here.

*Piso.* It is well then.  
Come, lay your hands upon my sword and swear  
That you would sooner die, and that would be  
A glorious sacrifice, than turn base traitors.

*[They all lay their hands upon his sword.]*

Ah ! now I know I do not speak to bastards,  
But worthy Roman sons of worthy sires.  
Now countrymen, deliberate a while !  
We see to what mean state we are reduced  
Of bondage and of infamous slavery,  
Beneath a cursed usurper's bloody sway.  
O think how much of noble blood is shed,  
Merely to satisfy a tyrant's humour,  
Such blood, O countrymen, such precious blood  
As might have stood against a world of foes  
To keep our Rome the empress that she is.  
How long will you endure such tyranny,  
And linger in this foul and hateful bondage ?  
Our fathers' spirits start up from their graves,  
And call us womanish and cry for men.

## The Tragedy of Nero 115

They slew great Julius for their liberty,  
And they were brutes that stabbed that noble heart,  
For he was not a tyrant like this man.  
But Brutus argued that Cæsar might be one,  
And that he might be he thought to prevent it.  
He might have been a tyrant or might not,  
But here is one who is and will be ever,  
And therefore he must be allowed no more.  
O countrymen ! even if you think they erred,  
Whose daggers stabbed the mightiest Cæsar's heart,  
Let their dead spirits live in you again,  
That you may be free from a lion's teeth.

*Luc.* We Romans are accustomed to be free,  
And liberty hath been our honoured fight  
Which even the spirits of the dead inspire.  
When the great and immortal Rome was made,  
Then all the gods said " Let our Rome be free,"  
Freedom and liberty must be our cry.

*Piso.* Why, Caius was stabbed not by public  
grievers,  
Though well did he deserve a tyrant's death,  
But by the tribunes for their private griefs.  
Think how much dearer is our present cause  
In that our dearest blood is being sucked  
By such a hungry monster as this man,  
The most tyrannic tyrant of them all.  
How will our fathers' spirits all rejoice  
When they see the flag flying in our hands  
" Your Rome is free."—Now speak you severally.

## 116 The Tragedy of Nero

*Mil.* Let all the precedents we have now be  
Examples to our honourable cause.

At any cost let us be free at once.

*Nat.* Or brand ourselves as willing slaves and  
bondmen.

Who is so base that he will be a slave  
While he hath a sword hanging by his side?  
Let us live freemen, or else die for once.

*1st Noble.* For my part, gentlemen, my sword is  
here

Prompt to draw and strike at the hour prefixed.  
O could I drive it in the tyrant's heart,  
I would be then avenged for all my kin  
Whose noble blood is dripping from his hands.  
Let us set flying the flag of liberty.

*2nd Noble.* His hands are red with too much of  
my blood,

And fain would I lay down a thousand lives  
To see my dagger's point upon his throat.  
Let's be free and restore our liberty.

*3rd Noble.* Nor is the tyrant innocent of my  
blood.

How many timelessly he hath cut off  
That would have been the precious gems of Rome.  
The gods cry out on us for our revenge.  
Let us strike if we would be free again.

*Piso.* There never was such unity before.  
Come, come, brave Romans, lay your hands again  
Upon my sword, and swear again, conjoint,



## The Tragedy of Nero 117

That Nero shall die and we will be free

*All (laying hands upon his sword).* Nero shall die and we will be free.

*Piso.* Man is the maker of his destiny.  
There is no fate but we ourselves do make,  
And if it upsets all our trusts and hopes,  
We shift the fault upon the faultless stars,  
While rather we for that ourselves should blame.  
Bear that in mind before we are dispersed,  
And see your purpose sleeps not in your hearts,  
But that it lives both in your minds and hands.

*Nat.* Would not good Seneca make one of us?

*Luc.* Nay, pass him over; I know he will not.

The youthful spirit that doth move in us  
In him is dead, nor will it work in him;  
'Twere vain to stir his soul to such a fire.

*Piso.* Then leave him out; we want whole hearts not half.

For such would rather be to us a danger  
Than helpers in the danger we are in.  
We must find out when Nero doth stir forth  
That we might take the tyrant unawares.  
Now let us part until to-morrow night.

*[Exit all but Piso and Lucan.]*

*Piso.* What think you of our perilous enterprise?

*Luc.* That if we show the courage we have talked,

## 118 The Tragedy of Nero

We shall not fail.

*Piso.* My heart misgives me though.

What, if we are betrayed before we strike ?

*Luc.* Then there is nothing but to die like  
Romans.

But, *Piso*, you must look upon success

And not indulge in fancies, since you must act ;

And to your natural spirit you must add

The fearless spirit of our ancestors.

*Piso.* Are *Milichus* and *Natalis* both tried men ?

*Luc.* Why, *Piso*, that is more than I can say.

This is my first engagement, as you know.

Let us depend upon ourselves and the gods.

*Piso.* Methinks it is upon the hour of midnight.

Come let us wander forth into the streets ;

We might by chance hear voices to our cause,

And if we do, what more could we desire ?

[*Exit both.*]

### SCENE 5.—*A Street.*

*Enter Milichus and Natalis.*

*Nat.* Speak then, shall we reveal the plot at  
once ?

*Mil.* Aye, if thereby our lives would not be lost.

*Nat.* First reason if we are safe as we stand.

Is not this *Piso* of a wavering mind ;

More forward with his tongue than with his sword ?

## The Tragedy of Nero 119

What guarantee we have of our success ?  
In weak hands such a pithy enterprise  
Will only thrive in words, not in the deed.

*Mil.* I know that Piso is not fit to lead,  
And it were better they should be betrayed.  
But shall we seek the emperor at this hour ?

*Nat.* The rather for we want him to believe  
That it was our respect upon his life,  
Not fear or thought of safety for ourselves.  
And I will implicate old Seneca,  
For I do bear him an eternal grudge.

*Mil.* Nor Lucan shall escape ; I have him  
now,  
Though all our ancient quarrels have been patched.

*Nat.* Then come away ; I see two men approach.  
[*Exit Milichus and Natalis.*]

*Enter Piso and Lucan.*

*Piso.* Did you not see them steal away ?

*Luc.* I did.

*Piso.* They looked like Milichus and Natalis.

*Luc.* Aye.

*Piso.* It bodes no good. Why should they hide  
from us ?

*Luc.* Perhaps they took us for the watch.

*Piso.* Perhaps !

No, Lucan, no ; we do not stand secure.

With Milichus you had a quarrel once ?

*Luc.* I had, but it is now extinct in Lethe,

## 120 The Tragedy of Nero

Or I would not have had him of our party.

*Piso.* I am so fully apprehensive now ;  
And for my apprehensions there's some ground.  
Yet let us trust and hope, and rest the while.  
[*Exit both.*]

SCENE 6.—*A Room in the Palace.*

*Enter Nero.*

O Nemesis ! O Nemesis !  
How awful is your retribution !  
How ruthlessly you persecute the wretch,  
When once you claw and nail him in your clutch ?  
You show the villain the image of himself  
As the best polished mirror cannot show.  
'Tis conscience makes my nights unsleepable.  
Yet Nero is not the man to be awed.  
I will defy you and be your Nemesis.  
What, thou slave, ho ! thy emperor bids !  
Where, boy, where ? Dost thou sleep ? Awake,  
awake !

*Enter Epaphroditus.*

Shake off the devil of sleep from thine eyes ! Go,  
fetch me thy instrument !

*Epa.* My liege, 'tis not in harmony——

*Nero.* Go, fetch it at once, 'tis in harmony  
with my humour. Fetch it, I say, and strike a  
note or two ; or tell me some tale, fashioned to my  
humour.

## The Tragedy of Nero 121

*Epa.* What tale would be best to the liking of your grace.

*Nero.* That of the man who killed his mother and was haunted by her ghost.

*Epa.* My lord! my lord! was there ever such a monster in the world?

*Nero.* What, villain, what, callest thou me monster? [*Strikes him.*]

*Epa.* Not you, my lord, but the man who killed his mother.

*Nero.* The tale is not on record yet, though it has outrecorded the records of the world's villainies, but 'twill be soon——

But hark! what sound is that?

*Epa.* What sound, my lord?

*Nero.* Dost thou not hear the ringing of a bell?

*Epa.* None that I can hear.

*Nero.* There, there, hark again!

*Epa.* Your grace is tranced!

*Nero.* What didst thou say, villain?

*Epa.* I said I thought your grace was in a trance.

*Nero.* Brute! I have a clear conscience.

*Epa.* What means my liege?

*Nero.* I say, thou brute! I have a clear conscience——

But O! there it goes like some devil's bell!

Again—hark, there, again! Go, villain, go

And see if it doth ring about the palace.

[*Exit Epaphroditus.*]

## 122 The Tragedy of Nero

Where doth it ring? O thou infernal sound!  
Ah! it is here, here against my conscience.  
O mother! you have set it ringing here!  
How terrible, how awful is the noise!  
Stop it, stop it, O Nemesis, stop it!  
You have waken'd up all hell against my soul.  
Stop it! I charge ye in the name of hell  
Stop it! It makes me mad, it makes me mad!

*Re-enter Epaphroditus.*

Speak, villain, speak, where doth it ring?

*Epa.*

My lord!

All round the palace is as calm as sleep.

*Nero.* Where doth it ring then? Hark, hark,  
there again!

Look, look, a fiend comes! Save me, save me!

*Epa.* It is one of the guards.

*Nero.*

What does he want?

*Enter a guard.*

Why dost thou stir forth hither at this hour?

*Guard.* Two men, and from their habits, gentlemen,

Bring your grace some news that imports your life.

*Nero.* Aye, aye, some villains greedy for my life.

*Guard.* Their earnest looks speak not such foul intent.

*Nero.* Then fetch them in well-guarded.

[*Exit guard.*

Get thee gone.

[*Exit Epaphroditus.*

## The Tragedy of Nero 123

How doth a villain start and fear himself,  
Because he thinks the world is full of villains !  
The merest shadow that doth fleet by him,  
He doth fear for a murderer. Fear makes  
Of him a coward weak and fanciful !

*Enter two guards with Natalis and Milichus.*

*Guard.* My lord ! here are the men would speak  
to you.

*Nero.* Come close ; let me see ; aye, I know you  
both.

What makes you bold upon my natural right,  
That you come seeking me upon this hour ?

*Nat.* The thought of the safety of your Majesty.

*Mil.* Believe us, worthy liege, it is but that.

*Nero.* My safety ? Is my safety in your hands,  
And how ?

*Nat.* In that we know you stand in danger.  
There is a terrible plot against your life,  
Which, if your grace is off your guard, may thrive.

*Mil.* My liege, it is already set afoot,  
And now the traitors only wait their chance.

*Nero.* And is the party of any good repute ?

*Nat.* Some noblemen with Piso in the lead,  
And Seneca and Lucan flaming up the fire.

*Nero.* What, Seneca too ?

*Nat.* He too, my lord, be sure ?  
Even Milichus will swear to it.

*Mil.* My liege,

## 124 The Tragedy of Nero

I swear to it, and by your leave may add  
That Lucan is the hottest of them all.

*Nero.* Tell me the manner of their vile device.

*Nat.* More than to anything they trust to chance,  
Or when you walk forth to the market-place,  
Or on your way to the Olympic games,  
That your grace might be taken by surprise,  
As was the Emperor Caius at his death.

*Nero.* Well, well, these villains so will take my  
life

If they but live to use their hands on me.  
But how came you both to know of it all?

*Nat.* In Piso's house the plot was laid to-night,  
And we, too, pledged ourselves among the number,  
Pretending to be their accomplices,  
But in truth thinking of your royal safety.

*Mil.* And sure, my lord, it is with this regard  
We have encroached upon your right of rest.

*Nero* (*to the guard*). Despatch some of the  
guards at once to arrest the traitors, and let their  
heads be off at once; but let Lucan and Seneca be  
fetched before me. As for the nobles, these  
gentlemen will guide you to their homes. Your  
duty done, come back with these gentlemen who  
must have their rewards (*exit one guard with*  
*Milichus and Natalis*), and your heads will be your  
rewards. (*To the other guard*) Fellow, keep  
thine eyes upon these villains who seem to do it  
more out of some private spite than any thought



## The Tragedy of Nero 125

upon my safety. Now go about thy duty, and  
send my boy hither. [*Exit guard.*]

Look, Nero, look! how rank thou hast become!  
Thou art in danger, and that thou art once  
How often thou wilt be thou canst not tell.

*Enter Epaphroditus.*

Come away, it is getting near to-day. Robe me  
up in my best to dazzle Statilia. The traitor's  
heads off, I go straight to the altar. [*Exit both.*]

SCENE 7.—*A Room in Seneca's house.*

*Enter Seneca.*

At last I see the morning rising star.  
And feel that the world is at peace again.  
O what a sight it was of fearful dreams  
Wherein I saw the grievous fate of Rome  
That she was doomed to ruin and destruction.  
Be not so sudden, ye immortal powers,  
But keep your wonted watch upon your Rome.

*Enter Pullina.*

*Sen.* How now, dear Pullina? why look you  
pale?

*Pul.* How shall I utter that which I have dreamt.

*Sen.* What, dream on dream? fate on fate?  
doom on doom?

It means something, dear gods! it means something.

## 126 The Tragedy of Nero

*Pul.* How shall I utter that which I have dreamt?  
O Seneca! if I were young again,  
In the first days of love, I had not been  
A whit less sorrowful than I am now.

*Sen.* Come, come, tell me your dream.

*Pul.* O dear my lord!  
Last night, (O that that night had never come?)  
I dreamt I saw you all in heavy tears,  
Betrayed, undone, by malice and by hate,  
Bowing as low as to the emperor's feet,  
And pleading for your life, but all in vain.  
Then I did kneel and pray and beg for you,  
But was at once thrust back by cruel hands,  
And then, forbid it gods! methought I saw  
Your sacred blood stream down upon the ground.  
What more I could not know, nor wished to know,  
For with that I could sleep no more.

*Sen.* Ah me!

Dear Pullina, for aught we know or guess  
Your dream might realise what it portends.

*Pul.* No, no, no, no! my lord, it were too cruel.  
It shall not be so, it shall not be so.  
O how could I behold your sacred blood,  
And after live to wail the piteous sight?  
What heavy sound is that? Look, look a guard!  
O gods! O Seneca! what could it mean?

*Enter a guard.*

*Guard.* Prepare you, sir, to bid your kin farewell.

## The Tragedy of Nero 127

*Sen.* What means such a strange greeting in the morn?

*Guard.* That I arrest you for high treason here.

*Sen.* What! Seneca arrested for high treason?

*Guard.* Believe me, sir, I come upon command.  
But now hath been discovered a foul plot,  
Which aims at our most gracious emperor's life,  
And in which your name also is involved.

*Sen.* Some villainy is uprisen against my honour.

*Guard.* If innocent, the gods will help you out;  
And I do pray that it may come to that.  
Now, sir, pray come away.

*Pul.* You have a heart  
Alive to kindness and to sympathy.  
Good Roman! take my house, take all I have,  
Till I am beggared out into the streets,  
But let my lord escape ignominy.  
Let him fly, and in his place arrest his wife,  
If but a life be all your emperor needs.  
O let him fly! I beg you on my knees——

*Sen.* Rise, Pullina, rise, do not forget thyself.  
Thou dost not beg for honour nor for life,  
But for redoubled, nay for trebled shame.  
Would not my flight assure my innocent guilt,  
And voluntarily disgrace my name?  
Take heart, my dear, and let us part in hope;  
For I am armed with open innocence.

*Pul.* O my lord! if I let you go from me,  
I know I shall never see you again.

## 128 The Tragedy of Nero

O hideousness of a prophetic dream !

*Guard.* The emperor is impatient, come away.

*Pul.* O woe ! he is impatient of your blood !

Let me go with you, let me go with you !

*Sen.* Wherefore, dear Pullina ? nay, stay away,  
If I am doomed to bleed, though innocent,  
The sight will not be meet for thy dear eyes.

*Pul.* O come what will, but let me go with you.

*Sen.* Have then thy wish, come my dear, come  
away. [*Exit all.*]

SCENE 8.—*A Room in the Palace.*

*Enter Nero and Statilia attended.*

*Nero.* Why lookest thou sad upon thy wedding  
day ?

*Sta.* Why, is it not enough to make me sad  
That a plot had been laid against your life,  
And that upon such an auspicious day.

*Nero.* But I have nipped the canker in the bud  
To make the flower of life full sweet again.  
Tell me, Statilia, dost thou not rejoice  
That Nero leads thee to the altar now ?

*Sta.* In sooth, my lord ! I am so overjoyed  
I cannot gauge or measure my delight.  
But it were well and customary, too,  
My gracious lord, if I were given yet  
Some time to mourn my husband's sudden death.

## The Tragedy of Nero 129

*Nero.* 'Tis well she knows not how it was so sudden (*aside*).

And spoil thy beauty with unprofitable tears?

No, Statilia, thou shalt weep no more.

*Sta.* Do you love me, my lord?

*Nero.* Love thee, my dear?

I worship all thy charms, the gifts of gods.

What more should Nero say in praise of them?

For beauty is its own true orator.

Thy question, however, is contagious.

Tell me, sweet, dost thou love me?

*Sta.* Who would not?

When I stand here and gaze upon your face,

I wonder not if wives did break their vows.

*Nero.* Enough, enough! thou of my beauty speak'd'st

So gracefully that I run mad with joy.

Give me some time to settle with those traitors.

Meanwhile, prepare thee for our happiness.

[*Exit Statilia with her train.*]

*Enter guards with Lucan.*

Nay, nay, hide not your face! look up, my poet!

Your emperor welcomes you most heartily

How now, why do you hang your head so low,

And sigh as if your breath were going out?

Have you lost all the power of your tongue?

How would you like to read your verses here?

Or would you have a dagger in your hands?

## 130 The Tragedy of Nero

*Luc.* Pray you, mock me not, but send me away.

*Nero.* Wouldst thou not send thy dagger in my heart?

Villain! traitor! dost thou not feel abashed?

*Luc.* Abashed? wherefore? I am no traitor, sir!

Most rightly that ignoble epithet

Were given now to those perfidious men,

Who have betrayed the trust we placed in them.

To kill a tyrant whom you cannot cure

Is not to be a traitor but a patriot;

And to die in the cause of liberty

Is not ignominy, but martyrdom.

*Nero.* Villain, villain! if I had ever known

That underneath that sheepish countenance

Thou hidest a serpent's heart with viper-fangs,

I would have given up a thousand Romes

To have thee hewn in pieces like a tree.

Thou traitor! darest thou defend thyself,

When thou shouldst fall at once upon thy knees,

And like an abject slave plead for thy life?

*Luc.* I do not care to ask that boon of you.

It were as good as asked or asked not for,

For asked it never would be granted me.

If I must bleed to death, why then I die

As soldiers, fighting for their country, die.

*Nero.* Fellow, hand him that bloody instrument.

[*A guard gives Lucan a lance.*]

Come, traitor, come, now lance thy traitorous heart!

## The Tragedy of Nero 131

My soul will leap up at the sight of blood.

*Luc.* Beware of those two villains whom you spare.

*Nero.* Think not, thou traitor, think not that they live.

Traitors that they were, they have died already.

Come, come, thy blood, thy blood!—I am impatient.

*Luc.* Say that Lucan died like a Roman—thus.

[*Bleeds himself.*]

*Nero.* Away, let hellish furies seize on him.

[*The guards bear Lucan away.*]

*Enter two guards with Seneca, followed by Pullina.*

*Nero.* Welcome, philosopher! thrice welcome here,

Lay bare your loathsome heart.

*Sen.*

Ah! is it thus?

*Nero.* It is thus, my philosopher, it is thus!

It was thus you aimed at your emperor's life,

And it is thus your emperor aims at yours.

*Sen.* Do you believe, O Nero? do you believe This forgery against my honest soul?

A tale that children well might idly tell,

Or an invention of some grudge and hate?

Would Seneca so far forget himself,

Would he forget the gods he venerates,

Or be so mindless of great Jove's revenge

That he would steep his soul in heinous bloodshed?

## 132 The Tragedy of Nero

*Nero.* What monstrous villainy old age could  
hide !

Out, out ! Think you, vile traitor as you are,  
That your hypocrisy will move my heart ?  
No, traitor, no, no, I will not relent.

*Pul.* My gracious liege ! my lord is innocent.  
Or he is no more harmful than the dove  
That harmless sits within its nest and coos.  
When Seneca turns traitor, then let the gods  
Turn traitors too against the lordliest Jove.

*Sen.* Immortal gods ! if ever my true heart  
Did harbour treason, with your thunderbolts  
Dash me to pieces !

*Nero.* I, I will do it.  
I will dash you to pieces, not the gods.  
Come, my philosopher, say your last prayers.

*Sen.* Nero ! pupil ! emperor ! noble liege !  
Look, look, your Seneca is innocent,  
Or he would not plead to you for his life.  
Let me not perish with a ragged name.  
Take life, but keep my honour unassailed,  
For life I prize not half so well as honour,  
Kill me, but oh ! condemn me not a traitor.  
My heart is as far from all treasonous thoughts  
As truth from falsehood, or as Heaven from Hell.

*Nero.* And, traitor, my heart is as near to blood  
As Hades is to all tormented souls.  
Come, bleed yourself, and so allay my thirst.

[*Guard gives Seneca a lance.*]



## The Tragedy of Nero 133

*Pul.* Not yet, my lord, not yet your precious blood.

O Nero ! justice dwells with all the gods.

Will you discard the virtue of the gods,

And thus condemn a loyal heart to death ?

O let my woman-tears appeal to you !

O let my weeded widowhood move you !

Look, how a woman crouches at your feet,

And humbly begs of you her husband's life !

*Nero.* Out of my sight ; I am as deaf as rocks.

Be quick, traitor, be quick, and bleed yourself.

*Pul.* Show but a little, O a little mercy,

And let me die with him, self-sacrificed !

*Nero.* I will but hew the tree, and keep the branch

That it may wither from pain and die away.

*Pul.* O Jupiter ! how canst thou suffer this !

Where are thy thunderbolts ? Where are thy fires ?

*Sen.* Come near, my wife, and give me thy last blessing.

Weep not nor tear thy sweet devoted heart.

Oft have I told thee of the other worlds

Where meet the dead ; there shall we meet again.

Rejoice that thy Seneca dies innocent !

*Pul.* Yes, innocent, a thousand times innocent !

Is this the last embrace I take from you ?

Is this the last look we shall have of each ?

O Seneca ! the gods receive your soul !

## 134 The Tragedy of Nero

I can bear it no more. O gods! O gods!

[*Exit Pullina distractedly.*]

Sen. Watch over my poor widow, immortal Powers!

Look, Nero, look! Your Seneca departs.

They all shall cry through all the streets in Rome,  
"Woe worth the day when Nero got the crown."

Behold, ye gods! what innocent blood is shed

But to allay a cursed monster's thirst.

[*Bleeds himself.*]

Nero. You to the stove, traitor! I to the altar!

[*Exit severally, the guards bearing Seneca away.*]

### ACT V.

SCENE 1.—*A large open Place. In the middle an aqueduct, with raised steps, and arches. Beyond an immense fire raging.*

*Enter men, women and children, with some old people in fright and terror.*

All. Rome is perishing. Rome is perishing.  
The fire is spreading and Rome is perishing.

Several. Kill Nero! Behold, our Rome is perishing.

Old Men. Let us to the temple, and offer prayers and incense to the gods to pacify them.

## The Tragedy of Nero 135

*Sev.* Curse the gods, they have ceased to watch over Rome.

*A Citizen.* Let us fall upon Nero, the lords, and all our enemies, and set a deluge of bloodshed streaming.

*All.* Let us kill them all; let us kill them all.

*A Cit.* It is the cursed Nero who hath set our Rome on fire, that he might build another city, and call it Neronia.

*All.* Kill Nero, kill Nero, kill Nero!

*2nd Cit.* It is Vulcan bid by Jupiter to destroy our Rome with the fire from beneath the earth. With the fire the gods give us the burning month of June. They were not so relentless when a fire broke out in the time of Brennus, for then the Capitol was saved. But now all Rome is perishing, all Rome is perishing.

*An Old Man.* Let us implore and pray the great Jove.

*Sev.* The great Jove be curst, all Rome is perishing.

*1st Cit.* The waters in the aqueducts are poisoned, that every one of us may perish. Nero himself is watching the fire from the terrace of his palace.

*2nd Cit.* He is run mad, and will command the soldiers and the gladiators to fall upon us, and make our Rome a hell of universal slaughter.

*All.* Kill him, kill him, kill him, kill, kill Nero!

## 136 The Tragedy of Nero

*1st Cit.* Hundreds of our kin have perished. Lions with burning manes and elephants and bisons tear and trample down the people. Curse the gods, curse the gods !

*All.* Curse the gods, curse the gods, curse the gods !

*Women.* Where shall we find clothings and wheat and homes. We are beggared, we are beggared.

*Sev.* Let us plunder the nobles.

*An Old Man.* Behold ! all the heavens are fire, and the gods are looking down upon the ruin. Let us supplicate them.

*Sev.* Have mercy on us, O gods, have mercy on us, and save our Rome.

*Sev.* They mock us and spread the fire.

*All.* Curse them, curse them, curse the gods.

*Sev.* Havoc on havoc ! where shall we fly ?  
What shall we do ?

*Sev.* Let us perish in the flames.

*Sev.* Let us kill our enemies.

*All.* Kill our enemies ! Kill, kill, kill them ?

*Enter the Prefect with guards.*

*All (rushing).* Kill our murderers ! Kill our murderers !

*Pref.* Keep off, ye rebels, keep off, or I will dash you all to pieces !

*All.* They come to slaughter us ; kill them ! kill them !

## The Tragedy of Nero 137

*Pref.* Villains! cowards! I come not to slaughter you but to guard the divine person of Cæsar. Make way, villains, make way, here comes the mighty Cæsar.

*Enter Nero with several nobles.*

*All.* Matricide! Incendiary! Kill him!  
kill him!

*[They rush but are driven back by the guards.]*

*Nero.* Howl, howl, ye fiends, howl and I will listen.

Call me incendiary; call me matricide;  
Call me a thousand other names as vile  
As your vile tongues! Growl, growl and roar like  
lions!

Howl, howl, ye demons, howl and I will listen.

*All.* He mocks us; he mocks us; kill, kill, kill  
him!

*Nero.* The villains now are turning savage  
beasts,  
And they might tear me with their monstrous  
teeth.

My very throne is trembling 'neath my feet.

*Pref.* My gracious liege, ascend the aqueduct.  
These steps are made on purpose for your grace  
To keep you safe from the mad populace.

*Nero.* Come then, help me ascend, and guard me  
well.

*[Nero ascends the aqueduct.]*

## 138 The Tragedy of Nero

*Sev. People.* He ascends ; let us hear him now.

[*Nero stands quiet.*]

*1st Cit.* Look, he stands in his purple mantle and his golden wreaths.

*Pref.* Behold, Romans, behold our human god !  
The envy of the immortal Jupiter !  
Behold him clothed like Jove in golden wreaths.

[*A noble gives Nero a lute.*]

*2nd Cit.* He takes the lute and looks up to the heavens for inspiration as if this were time for merry singing.

*1st Cit.* He adjusts himself, as if he were on the stage. See how he smiles that we might gaze upon his beauty, and hold our breath in silent adoration.

*Sev.* Silent, ho ! he speaks.

*Sev.* Say rather he sings.

*Nero.* Bend down, ye gods, for Nero strikes his lute.

O thou blind minstrel of the glorious Greece,  
I pity thee the tears which thou wilt shed,  
For Homer will by Nero be outsung.  
And thou, Apollo, god of gods of song,  
Thou too shalt own my sweeter melodies,  
And out of shame hide thy out-lusted head.

*Sev. People.* He mocks us ! Stop his mouth.  
Drag him down !

*Nero.* Ah ! this is how the villains love the  
Muses !

*Sev. People.* He speaks again ; listen, listen !

## The Tragedy of Nero 139

*Pref.* Listen, great Cæsar strikes his lyre again.

*Nero.* O Rome! my Rome! my mother and  
my nurse!

Dear nest and cradle of my glorious fathers!  
My Rome divine, but ancient Rome no more!  
O Rome that seemedst eternal as the heavens,  
In thy pale ashes thou hast now become  
The relic of a wrecked and ruined grandeur,  
Meet theme for poet's pen,  
Meet object for the painter's brush;  
Meet dirge for Nero's and Apollo's lute.  
With joy too deep for words do I behold  
These mighty flames that like the ocean's waves  
Expand and swell, and circling roll, and flow  
Like fiery fountains in the rapturous air.  
Rage, rage, ye mighty flames and pierce the  
heavens;

Burn, burn, my city, burn, and I shall rejoice.  
Thy splendid ruin is more dear to me  
Than all the grandeur of thy palaces,  
Thy temples and thy immortal capitols.  
Burn, burn, my city, burn in fire and blood,  
And be thyself thy glorious sepulchre.  
Burn on, burn on, my Rome, and give me joy,  
For fire and blood to me are one delight!

*Sev. People.* Kill the monster! kill the monster!  
he rejoices in our ruin.

*Other People.* What doubt he set Rome on fire!  
Matricide! kill him! kill him!

## 140 The Tragedy of Nero

*All.* Kill him! kill, kill, kill, kill, kill him!

*Pref.* Gracious lord! they are becoming full dangerous now, arming themselves with stones. Let Cæsar descend and make them promises.

*Nero.* Come then, Cæsar will speak to the plebeian slaves *[Nero descends.]*

*Sev. People.* He descends, let us hear him!

*Nero.* Dear people! my beloved subjects listen! Nor blasphemy, nor prayers, nor despair, But I will build your mighty Rome again. Old worlds shall crumble down, and from their  
as h

New worlds with the fire of the old shall rise,  
And the earth go on making and unmaking.  
I know, you are unhoused, unclothed, undone;  
But I will clothe and house you all again.

*People.* But the fire rages and Rome is perishing,

*Nero.* The cursed Christians have set your Rome on fire, whom I will have butchered before your eyes without ruth or pity. Now go, disperse, and fly to my garden.

*People.* To the garden, to the garden, to the garden. *[Exit all the mob.]*

*Nero.* Follow them with the guards and keep the Christians ready for our riot.

*Pref.* My lord! will you have the innocent killed!

*Nero.* Fool, the people must be amused somehow. Go follow them. *[Exit Prefect with the guards.]*



## The Tragedy of Nero 141

You, my lords, precede me to the palace and lay open my garden. I will ascend once again and have one last look at the ancient city.

[*Exit nobles. Nero ascends.*]

Cease not, thou fire, cease not, but rage eternal!

This scene is worthy of the eyes of Jove.

This gorgeous ruin doth delight my soul

Wherein doth burn a fire more hot than this.

Farewell! Rome of my fathers! fare thee well!

Nero shall change thee in a paradise

And shame his fathers and the gods withal.

Farewell, my ancient Rome, farewell to thee!

[*Around the fire rages. He stands on the aqueduct and the curtain drops.*]

SCENE 2.—*A Street.*

*Enter three Nobles.*

1st Noble. Doth it not seem that chosen of the gods,

And being queen and mistress of the world,

Rome was predestined to be thus destroyed!

O! by what a perverted destiny

This dear immortal portion of the earth,

This second lower throne of Jupiter,

Should but by a stroke have been wrecked and ruined!

2nd Noble. By whom but by her cursèd enemy,

## 142 The Tragedy of Nero

An upstart and a monster of the woods,  
A tyrant and a perfidious matricide !  
Would to gods that that Brutus were alive,  
Who to preserve the free-born state of Rome  
Drove the usurping Tarquins from the land  
When this usurper stole the golden laurel,  
Wherewith he crowned his head but to damn it.

*3rd Noble.* Ah, my Rome ! such a Brutus lived  
not then !

And had he lived, then what could that have done ?  
A Brutus by himself could not have been,  
While other Brutuses were dear and rare,  
Strong and sufficient 'gainst a tyrant's teeth.  
The spirit of our fathers doth not move,  
Nor work in us. We are denatured all,  
And have become used to a grovelling state.

*1st Noble.* Shame not ourselves ; we are not  
un-Romaned yet.

If but another Brutus could be found.  
To stir the fire in us, would we not move ?  
Would we not then shake off this dullard, sloth,  
And make ourselves as active as the sea  
That after slumber wakes with trebled rage ?

*3rd Noble.* That Brutus and that fire are extinct ;  
Nor is there any spark now left in us  
To flame the embers so worthy to be flamed.  
What must we now, what but abide the times ?  
Our words without our actions only mock us.  
But look you there, what men are coming hither.

## The Tragedy of Nero 143

*2nd Noble.* By the dim light I see it is the tribunes.

Belike some tidings we might learn from them.

*Enter Ligarius and Velutus.*

How, now, what business keeps you yet abroad.

*Lig.* One that concerns each man in Rome.

*2nd Noble.* What's that?

*Lig.* Why, sir, your question doth astound me most.

Do you not know as yet that Gaul and Spain  
Are armed to rise against the throne of Nero?  
Old Galba hath been long proclaimed in Spain,  
And the whole Senate to maintain his claim  
Send envoys to Narbo to hail him there.

*Vel.* And Otho, too, from Lusitania  
Where Nero had that lord removed away,  
To Galba's flag doth now attach himself.  
The guards have also been seduced from him,  
And naught remains for the deserted Nero,  
Who is not a man of defence or skill,  
But to fly for life.

*1st Noble.* Say to fly for death.

The gods be praised the tyrant's hour is come.

*Vel.* Nor we are sorry now that it is come.

O had you seen that barbarous massacre,  
You would have wished it had come earlier.

*1st Noble.* Say you, you were eye-witnesses to it?

## 144 The Tragedy of Nero

*Lig.* Aye, sir, we were. O gods that we were not !

It was a sight more meet for cannibals.  
How ruthlessly the Christian blood was shed !  
A sight too bloody for the soul to bear ;  
Such horror as might have made mountains weep  
And devils put their arms across their eyes.  
But Nero stood fixed and inexorable,  
More cold than the Egyptian pyramids,  
And gloated o'er the horrible scene of blood,  
Unhumaned, and unnatured as to say,  
That he was not the making of the gods,  
But had from beasts his birth and origin.  
Amidst the thousand human tortured groans,  
That filled the air with sounds as deep as groans,  
And shook the winds and stopped them in their  
course,

He stood like an exulting Lucifer,  
A hellish demon, spiting the great Jove.

*Three Nobles.* O ye gods ! let the innocent be avenged !

*Lig. and Vel.* And soon they shall be, god's revenge is swift.

*1st Noble.* Let us, ere we disperse, here pray together,

“ Let Rome be free, dear gods, let Rome be free ! ”

*All.* Let Rome be free, dear gods, let Rome be free !

[*Exit all.*

## The Tragedy of Nero 145

SCENE 3.—*A Room in the Palace.*

*Enter Nero in a state of somnambulism.*

O seeing blindness, where dost thou lead me?  
To what black gulf my steps are borne away?  
What Hades that no man as yet hath known?  
What ugly sounds and sights I hear and see?  
What terror-striking shapes, O what illusions  
Keep passing and floating before mine eyes!  
Stick to thy place, O hell, and stir not forth  
To haunt a damnéd spirit in its sleep!  
What, damnéd spirits have no rest at all!  
O! am I not awake enough by day  
That thou by night must smite and haunt my soul!  
O Até, Até! thou most terrible Até!  
Who questions me? Away! I am Cæsar.  
Matricide! Murderer! Butcher! Fiend!  
Aye, aye, I hold all these names in my soul,  
And hell, too, keeps the record of these names.  
How many transgressions I am guilty of?  
Why am I questioned thus?  
Aye, aye, a thousand lives upon my soul!  
What heinous trespasses, what foul digressions!  
I am but clothéd in a raggéd name.  
I know that and know withal that I am damned.  
What inward monster holds my straining eyes?  
What fiend plucks them and turns them within  
That I may see the spots upon my soul?  
I see them, O avenging gods! I see them;

## 146 The Tragedy of Nero

I have defaced the temple of my soul,  
And have that shrine converted in a hell,  
An outcast from heaven.  
Read it ! Read what ? I know it, I know it.  
Damnation ! damnation ! immortal damnation !

[*He wakes.*]

Horror ! horror ! horror beyond all horror !  
Where am I ? Who hath stolen me from my bed ?  
What place is this ? which is earth and which  
hell ?

Statilia ! boy ! slave ! speak, what place is this ?  
No answer ! Villains ! speak, speak, speak ?

*Enter Statilia.*

*Sta.* O dear, my lord ! what groans mine ears  
have heard,  
That made from room to room a fearful echo,  
As if some soul was in the pangs of death !

*Nero.* Mine were those pangs, Statilia, mine,  
mine !

Where am I ? What place is this ?

*Sta.* Your own palace.

*Nero.* How comes it then that I am out of it ?

*Sta.* You are in it, my lord, not out of it.

*Nero.* Why then smell I the choking breath of  
hell ?

Help me, help me ! I faint, I gasp, I die !

*Sta.* What shall I do ? Shall I cry out for  
help ?

## The Tragedy of Nero 147

*Nero.* No, Statilia, no ; no help can come to me.

But O ! tell me who stole me from my bed ?

*Sta.* My lord, who could have done that but yourself ?

*Nero.* Not I, not I ! Hell stole me from my bed

To pass with me an hour in secrecy,  
That we might know each other face to face.

*Sta.* I fear me, my dear lord, you are not well.

*Nero.* Can flesh be healthy when the soul is stricken ?

Distorted spirits always live in tortures.

*Sta.* Can I do nothing to make my lord happy ?

*Nero.* Happy ? O an eternity of heaven

Can never from my memory wash out  
The past that clings to it ; a thousand Lethes  
Can never drown it in oblivion.

I am in hell—my soul—I am in hell !

Tell me, tell me, wilt thou go with me there ?

*Sta.* You set me riddles that I cannot solve.

Why do you talk of hells and stricken souls ?

*Nero.* For I am that which thou beholdest not.

I am what I perchance might not have been  
But for those damned and self-abandoned souls  
To whom of my free will I sold myself,  
The good that nature gave me I cast off,  
And evil then became my second nature.  
Nay, I and Evil did each other clasp

## 148 The Tragedy of Nero

Like loving twins out of a common womb.  
And now it hath become my sole delight  
To revel in no other sight but blood.  
Blood is my wine ; it is my sweetest nectar.  
I am grown so familiar with that colour  
That I must see it spread before mine eyes.  
How, now, what dost thou sigh, what dost thou  
weep?

*Sta.* That I was dead before I came to you.

*Enter Epaphroditus.*

*Epa.* My lord ! my lord ! here is Anicetus  
With fearful tidings he would speak at once.

*Enter Anicetus.*

*Nero.* Give me some peace, villains, give me  
some peace !

*Ani.* Here there is no peace for you any more.  
Your grace must fly at once.

*Nero.* What, Cæsar fly ?

*Ani.* He must in order to escape his death.  
Both Gaul and Spain have risen up in arms,  
And Galba any time might enter Rome  
With Otho and the legions at his beck.  
The Senate openly invite your foe  
And send out envoys to escort him here.

*Nero.* My guards ! my guards ! where are my  
darling guards ?

*Ani.* They too desert your grace to the last man.



## The Tragedy of Nero 149

*Nero.* The guards desert me too?—Then perish  
Nero!

The guards desert me? O, the guards desert  
me!

My life! O my life!

Where shall I hide it? Where shall I fly with it?

Who shall protect and keep it safe from them?

O! that it were an easy-slipping thing

That I might pocket it and fly away.

My life—O my life!

O what a terror it strikes in my heart!

My life—my death! my life, my life, O my life!

*Sta.* Pull not your robe and do not tear your  
hair—

*Nero.* Keep off! keep off! you are my mur-  
derer.

O none but murderers encompass me!

O that my honest Burrhus were alive!

He would have kept my life safe in his charge.

Here, take my crown, take my imperial throne,

But only let me fly from death—O death!

O life! O my dear life!

*Sta.* My lord! recall the spirit of your fathers—

*Nero.* Away! know'st thou not I did kill thy  
husband?

*Sta.* You killed my husband? O great Jupiter!

Burst, burst out with thy fiery thunderbolts,

And dash to pieces the foul murderer!

Let him not live, sweet heavens, let him not live!

## 150 The Tragedy of Nero

My curses fall upon your bloody soul !

[*Exit Statilia.*]

*Nero.* What shall I do ? where shall I fly away ?  
Show me but the way and I will risk it.

*Epa.* My lord ! fly to your freedman Phaon's house. 'Tis but four miles, an easy work on horse.

*Nero.* What do cowards teach to cowards but cowardice ? Come, let me fly, but first give me a guise.

*Epa.* Disguise will do your grace but little service.  
There is but one face like yours in all Rome,  
Whose beauty and imperial majesty  
In any guise would stand bare and apparent.

*Nero.* That face, boy, is the image of that hell  
Thou seest not, not of the heav'n thou seest.  
Come, come away ; they are pursuing me.  
Cæsar shall fly to-night, disguised as slave.  
I went disguised when I did kill my mother.  
Nay, start not thus ; I say I killed my mother.  
Ah ! thus you are avenged, accurséd gods !

[*Exit Nero and Epaphroditus.*]

*Ani.* Is it true then that conscience hath a voice  
That every hour bites, and strikes against it ?  
And is it also true that fear of death  
Makes kings worse cowards than their crouching  
slaves ?

*Enter Hercules and Oloaritus.*

*Her.* Anicetus ! or surely am I blind.

## The Tragedy of Nero 151

*Ani.* Your eyes are honest servants ; — well,  
what now ?

*Her.* Where is the emperor ? we come to seek  
him.

*Ani.* Your search is vain ; you'll find him here  
no more.

*Her. and Olo.* Is he taken then ?

*Ani.* He hath taken to heels.

*Olo.* Did you precede us with the fearful news ?

*Ani.* And had I not, had it not been too late !

Fear not, at least he will be safe from them,  
If not quite from himself.

*Her. and Olo.* Do you fear that ?

*Ani.* Aye, self on self is his last remedy.

*Enter Prefect with several guards.*

*Pref.* You villains, what do you here at this hour ?  
Where is the emperor ?

*Ani.* How do we know !

*Pref.* Arrest these villains for to-morrow's riot.  
These three are instruments of heinous mischief.

*[Exit Prefect, the guards bearing  
away the three.]*

SCENE 4.—*A Room in Phaon's house.*

*Enter Phaon and a servant.*

*Phaon.* Didst thou not hear loud bustle round  
the house ?

## 152 The Tragedy of Nero

*Ser.* Aye, sir, I did, and straight awoke with it.

*Nero* (*without*). What, Phaon! ho! Phaon!

Phaon!

*Phaon.* Run, sirrah, run! that earnest voice implies

Some urgent message from the emperor.

What sound is that as of some heavy fall?

*Ser.* O Jupiter! they have burst open the door!  
Look, sir, look? some villains in hot pursuit.

*Enter Nero and Epaphroditus.*

*Phaon.* Cæsar!

*Nero.* Aye, Cæsar in these slavish rags.

Why, Phaon, did not this guise deceive your eyes?

*Phaon.* Divinity! could I mistake that face?

If Jove put on the guise of mortal shape,

Would he not still be Jove? But by your pardon

How Cæsar could have been brought down to  
this?

*Nero.* Go, fellows, go, look to the horses.

[*Exit Epaphroditus and servant.*]

O Phaon, Phaon! where wilt thou hide me?

Is there some passage underneath the ground

Where I may slip and lie secure from them,

These hungry vultures pecking at my life?

*Phaon.* My liege! my house no secret nook  
affords

For Cæsar's safety from his enemies.

Yet as long as there's life within my veins

## The Tragedy of Nero 153

So long will I protect your gracious self.  
But who are they that thus pursue your life?

*Nero.* That curséd Galba with his damnéd  
legions.

The Senate, and the people, and the knights  
With open arms invite my enemy;  
And even the Pretorians, my last hope,  
The pillars to support my royal House,  
Or of themselves, or bribed, deserted me.  
O Phaon! what foul infidelity!  
Was ever woman faithless as my guards?  
Was ever man in worse extremities?

*Phaon.* Alas for you, my liege! it makes me  
weep.

Would they accept my poor life in exchange,  
Fain would I lay it down before their feet.  
Yet, dear my liege! do not look on despair!  
At once I'll post my servant at the door,  
And Epaphroditus and I myself  
Will steal forth if some news be possible.

*Nero.* Thanks, Phaon, thanks! Thou art a  
friend indeed!

If but my faithless guards had hearts like thine,  
What a rare treasure I would have possessed,  
More rich and rare than my Cæsarian throne.  
Go, Phaon, go, and take my boy with you,  
Nor come back but to say my life is safe.

*Phaon.* The gods be merciful upon your grace!

[*Exit Phaon.*]

## 154 The Tragedy of Nero

*Nero.* O coward, coward! why dost thou fear death?

Thou hast to die but once, or now, or after.

Why fear? Were I Cæsar a thousand times o'er,

I would not be immortal on this earth.

But that thereafter Plato speakest of,

Which Cato too did reason with himself,

—What could it be?

O Heaven? O Hell? what do they mean to man?

And with that an eternity combined.

How awful, O how fearful is the thought!

I am condemned! I am for ever damned!

O terrible eternity in Hell!

O let me have here that eternity!

—But there, but there—O to think of it!

Is hell to be my ever-lasting home?

Is there no hope, no looking-up from hell?

Chaste stars! tune forth a chorus of redemption

And send it upwards in the Heaven of heavens,

That by your intercession I be saved.

—O vain! O vain!

Ye angels! for one little moment of time

Could I be entertained into your spheres!

—O no! the soul-bewildering sight of things,

Your blissfulness would rankle in my heart,

And make me yet more miserable in hell!

O if the soul could be resolved like flesh,

And melted like the dew, I would be happy!

## The Tragedy of Nero 155

For 'tis the soul that turns me out from heaven !  
O Life ! O Death ! O Heaven ! O Hell ! O—  
God !

*Enter the Ghost of Claudius.*

O there, there hell bursts out again !

*Ghost.* Thou murdered'st me that thou mayst  
wear my crown ;

Therefore prepare thy damnéd soul for hell.

[*Exit Ghost.*

*Nero.* Avaunt ! avaunt ! thou needst not tell me  
that.

*Enter Ghost of Britannicus.*

*Ghost.* Thou thief ! thou plunderer of my native  
claim !

I come to sit upon thy damnéd soul.

[*Exit Ghost.*

*Nero.* Thou art not the only one to sit there.

*Enter Ghost of Agrippina.*

Not that, not that, O heavens ! not that !

*Ghost.* Like Tantalus standing in the nether  
world,

In an eternally tormenting lake,

Forbidden to quench his eternal thirst,

Beneath the hanging bunches of sweet grapes,

As merciless as sweet ; like him condemned

## 156 The Tragedy of Nero

By Zeus, thou also shalt be tantalised  
And with ten thousand other groaning tortures.

*[The Ghost throws down a dagger,  
and vanishes.]*

*Nero (lifting it up).* What shall I do with it?  
Throw it away?

Nay, nay, keep it; it was given me for use.

*Enter the Ghost of Octavia.*

*Ghost.* O Nero! I come not here to curse you,  
Although you have my blood upon your soul;  
But to remind you of my prophecy,  
“Nero shall die by himself.”

*[Exit Ghost.]*

*Nero.* Come back, thou angel! come back to  
curse me.

*Enter Ghost of Statilia's Husband.*

*Ghost.* Thou plunderer! thou curséd murderer,  
Who killed me to rob my Statilia,  
I come to tell thee thou art damned for ever.

*[Exit Ghost.]*

*Nero.* What matters it? It is no news to me.

*Enter Ghost of Antonia.*

*Ghost.* Monster! bloodhound! O thou most  
damnéd demon!  
Die with Antonia's curses on thy head,



## The Tragedy of Nero 157

And make in hell a football of thy soul!

[*Exit Ghost.*]

*Nero.* Aye, aye, I will play with it there.

*Enter Ghost of Seneca.*

*Ghost.* As thou art guilty of my innocent blood,  
With Seneca's curses be thou damned for ever.

[*Exit Ghost.*]

*Nero.* I know it was a piece of butchery.  
But Poppæa, where is Poppæa?

*Enter Ghost of Sabina.*

*Ghost.* Here I am!

*Nero.* O thou responsive hell! Whence comest  
thou?

*Ghost.* Why, there is but one answer to your  
question.

Whence would I come, whence, Nero, but from  
hell?

Come, I wait thee there.

*Nero.* Shall we meet again?

*Ghost.* We shall, we shall.

*Nero.* And also rule again?

*Ghost.* Not rule, but writhe in pains thou dreamst  
not of.

*Nero.* Then go, I will not come there.

*Ghost.* But thou shalt.

[*Exit Ghost.*]

*Nero.* O madness! O madness! O madness!

## 158 The Tragedy of Nero

O madness worse than death ! O Hell ! O Hell !  
Lock up thy gates ! But then where shall I go ?  
Madness ! madness ! madness !

*Enter Phaon and Epaphroditus.*

*Phaon.* You are betrayed, my liege ! you are  
betrayed !

And every moment they are making hither.

*Nero.* I have a dagger here—I will try it.

*[Puts it to his throat.]*

O how I tremble ! I will try again.

*[Puts it to his heart.]*

No, I cannot ! O what a coward it makes of me !

What sound is that ! Go and see ; nay, come  
back.

It is my murderers, my murderers !

Here, hold this dagger fast and drive it home.

*[Gives him the dagger.]*

*Epa.* Kill you ?

*Nero.* Aye, aye, if that be killing me ?

This is no time for question, strike at once !

Be quick, for I am on the verge of madness,

And I do stand betwixt and a hell and hell.

*Epa.* Turn then your face and look up to the  
gods.

*Nero.* Be quick, O be quick.

*Epa.*

I will be quick—thus——

*[Stabs himself.]*

*Nero.* O gods ! behold this glorious sacrifice !